

Essay

Politics beyond the Plate: Embracing Transdisciplinarity in Addressing the Gastronomic Heritage of Spain

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Abstract: Research and initiatives in the emerging field of gastronomy require collaboration among scholars and experts from diverse backgrounds. Transdisciplinarity has been indicated as an effective approach allowing stakeholders from a variety of disciplines and professional practices to better understand and plan interventions in complex gastronomy-related issues and challenges. However, the actors collaborating in such transdisciplinary processes often represent different priorities, values, and needs, as well as varying levels of power and access to financial means. This is particularly evident when it comes to gastronomic heritage. Its identification, support, and promotion require cultural, social, and political negotiations among a great number of stakeholders. Using a pilot workshop organized in March 2023 in Madrid as a case study, this article suggests that participatory design methods can offer instruments to ensure the effective transdisciplinarity required in gastronomy and to address the political tensions that underlie many of its aspects.

Keywords: gastronomic heritage; Spain; food design; participatory design; co-creation; transdisciplinarity; food politics



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1. Introduction

Gastronomy has been variously defined as the art of good eating (Merriam-Webster), the capacity of selecting and serving good food (Britannica), and the study of the relationship between food, culture, and tradition (Wikipedia). The use of the word has changed since Berchoux first coined it in his 1802 poem *La gastronomie ou l'homme des champs à table*, Grimod de la Reynière popularized it among the Parisian bourgeoisie through his *Almanach des Gourmands*, and Brillat-Savarin solidified it in *La physiologie du Goût*. A single definition for gastronomy does not exist; since the beginning, it indicated both a field of knowledge and forms of participation in the culinary arts that ranged from criticism, evaluation, and guidance in good taste to more hands-on and technical aspects. In part, the multiple meanings attributed to the word explain its success and broad usage.

As an area of research and education, gastronomy has been described in the scholarly literature as necessarily interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, as it builds on the biosciences, the culinary arts, the social sciences, the humanities, and professional fields such as law, marketing, and tourism [1–4]. It is also often considered as a field of applied practice, and as such, it has been indicated as a potential agent of change in the food system in terms of the economic development of local (often rural) communities, health and nutrition, and environmental impact [5].

Regardless of whether we consider it a field of knowledge, practice, or both, it is clear that interventions in gastronomy, with its diverse expressions and intricate interdependencies, often require the involvement of actors from different applied expertise and research backgrounds [6]. To ensure effective collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders in the field, it frequently appears necessary to move beyond interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary towards transdisciplinarity, an approach that engages not only

researchers in a multiplicity of academic disciplines but also non-academic stakeholders, while blurring the boundaries between theory and practice [7–10]. Such approach requires “combining, exchanging, blending and challenging the perspectives of many disciplines” [11] (p. 175) as a way “to synthesize varied perspectives and complex information (...) in order to understand contemporary food issues, and communicate effectively to diverse audiences” [11] (p. 173).

As research in transdisciplinarity shows, however, the involvement of a wide variety of actors frequently forces them to acknowledge and face pre-existing conflicts, especially when their decisions are likely to have an immediate and tangible impact on established structures, ingrained attitudes, and operational modes [12]. Transdisciplinary work also faces other challenges; for instance, it may be difficult to evaluate its effects on those involved in it and the context in which it takes place. Diverging definitions and understandings of the issues at hand often cause tensions; moreover, underrepresented stakeholders that are directly or indirectly affected by transdisciplinary projects risk being excluded from decision processes [13]. These dynamics and difficulties apply to research and intervention in gastronomy, as well; its stakeholders range from food producers and chefs to consumers, researchers, lawmakers, regulators, administrators at all levels of government, marketers, and activists, just to mention a few. Each of these categories are far from being monolithic; moreover, they occupy vastly disparate positions within the food system, with varying degrees of access to financial means, power, social capital, and education. Contrasting and at times clashing interests tend to shape discussions about gastronomy, generating debates about what a community—from a village to an international organization—is and should be in the future, how it defines its identity and its underlying values, and how it interprets its past. In other words, gastronomy can easily be entangled in the politics associated with the governance of a community. The political nature of food in general, and of gastronomy in particular, explains why culinary practices and traditions can be easily turned into ideological weapons to determine who belongs to a community and who does not, regardless of how the community is defined [14–18].

The literature about gastronomy has examined opportunities for collaboration and transdisciplinary interaction among different stakeholders from the points of view of vocabulary [19], entrepreneurship [20], and R&D activities [21], among others. At the institutional level, the European Union has also highlighted the need to take into consideration a variety of actors to achieve shared goals in food-related strategies [22,23]. However, the political tensions intrinsic to transdisciplinary work in gastronomy are not always fully acknowledged and discussed. While many examples of fruitful participations of designers in transdisciplinary interventions exist [24,25], specific reflections on the effectiveness of design methods in addressing the political aspects of such initiatives needs further development.

In order to address this gap in research and literature, this article reflects on gastronomic heritage, a dimension of gastronomy that refers to the aspects of food traditions considered so central to the identity and welfare of a community that they need special policies and strategies for their safeguarding [26,27]. In particular, the article considers whether design methods can be used to address the political tensions that dominate discussions around gastronomic heritage and to effectively bring multiple experiences and backgrounds to the table.

To evaluate this hypothesis, this article focuses on a pilot workshop organized in March 2023 in Madrid as a case study. The cultural and political debates surrounding gastronomic heritage make Spain a particularly interesting environment to test the effectiveness of design in addressing such issues. After discussing the findings from the pilot workshop, as well as its limitations, the article offers a summary of the study outcomes and preliminary considerations for future research.

1.1. Gastronomy and Gastronomic Heritage

According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, heritage is not something that exists out there, hidden or forgotten, just waiting to be rediscovered and reactivated: it is rather the result of intentional processes that are shaped by social, economic, and political motivations in connection with current conditions rather than with the past [28]. Such dynamics can also be applied to foodways and food systems. Objects, practices, and narratives that constitute food customs and traditions can be framed as gastronomic heritage through processes often referred to as heritagization. In these processes, it is institutions with attributed authority that identify certain elements of the community's foodways as particularly valuable and central to their identity, making them visible and protecting them by including them in specialized research, museums, registers, and lists [29]. A growing body of literature is addressing food heritagization [30,31] in contexts such as Peru [32], Mexico [33], and Japan [18], among others. Such research has revealed the frequent tensions between popular perceptions about what constitutes gastronomic heritage and the formalized procedures that give administrative authority to private and public institutions to choose what elements will be included in registers, lists, or museums, or will receive financial and logistical support.

Gastronomic heritage has been described in a 2014 European Parliament report as including production, distribution, and consumption processes as well as ingredients, dishes, and culinary practices [34]. The European resolution outlines gastronomy as “the combination of knowledge, experience, art and craft, which provides a healthy and pleasurable eating experience” and “forms part of our identity and is an essential component of the European cultural heritage and of the cultural heritage of the Member States”. It is also careful to underline that “gastronomy is one of the most important cultural expressions of human beings and the term should be understood as referring not only to what is known as ‘haute cuisine’, but to all culinary forms from the various regions and social strata, including those deriving from traditional local cuisine”. As such, it constitutes an important cultural element that needs to be transmitted to future generations. The present article employs the expression “gastronomic heritage”, rather than others such as food heritage, culinary heritage, or culinary traditions, because of its increasing visibility and usage in the policies of the EU (of which Spain is a member), both at the Union and at the national levels. Moreover, the adjective “gastronomic” expands the connotations of heritage to include the elements involved in the preparation and the consumption of food in the kitchen (*culina*, in Latin), as well as other aspects of the food systems, including the discursive elements through which a community thinks about and speaks about its food [35–37].

Due to its entanglement with society, politics, and the economy, gastronomic heritage presents a public dimension that inevitably implies conversations, debates, and disagreements about evaluations of the present and visions for the future, as well as discussions about the projects, interventions, and investments necessary to achieve that vision [38,39]. Administrative and political institutions, together with cultural organizations, are often attributed the authority not only to identify what counts as gastronomic heritage but also to determine the best approaches to call attention to it and support it, both domestically and abroad. In the case of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which, since 2010, has seen many food-related additions, it is national governments—typically through their highest cultural administration—that submit dossiers for inclusion to the UN agency [40,41]. Public institutions not only have a stake in such initiatives as involved partners, but also as sources of financial funding and social legitimation, whose value in political negotiations is evident.

These processes may exclude those who are not appropriately represented in governments and public institutions, such as ethnic and racial minorities, economically disadvantaged communities, and groups that, for cultural and social reasons, have limited access to political life [42–44]. Other exclusions in these negotiations may occur for specific stakeholders in the food system, such as restaurateurs, hospitality professionals, or traditional food producers, who may be well represented in the political arena but have

limited or no means to interact with the cultural administrations responsible for defining and managing gastronomic heritage. Not all stakeholders who participate in the creation and transmission of gastronomic heritage have structures of representation that enable them to interact with the public administration. Some of the stakeholders that should participate in these negotiations may be completely left out of any negotiations because their role is considered by the administration in charge to be outside the scope of gastronomic heritage at a specific point in time. On the other end of the spectrum, there may be several bodies representing the same category of actors (for instance, multiple chef associations) that compete for representation in public negotiations, each with a different vision regarding gastronomic heritage. This representation scenario is, furthermore, subject to constant change. Against this background, how can the political negotiations around gastronomic heritage be conducted to foster inclusiveness, allowing the voices of all stakeholders involved to be heard?

1.2. Gastronomic Heritage as a “Wicked Problem”

Design, as a field of research and practice, is particularly well equipped to deal with issues that present the characteristics of gastronomic heritage described above, which designers often refer to as “wicked problems”; constantly shifting in terms of breadth, context, and the stakeholders involved, they are difficult to circumscribe, and because of this, they require iterative processes. These problems cannot be solved once and for all, as each intervention may cause effects that change the current state of affairs and demand new assessments and interventions that take into consideration the previous ones. In fact, unintended consequences may complicate already thorny situations. As wicked problems have no unique causes, there are no single, silver-bullet solutions for them; moreover, there are no absolutely good and bad solutions, as stakeholders may have very different perspectives, priorities, and needs [45,46].

The process of identifying and managing gastronomic heritage also presents itself as a “wicked” problem. As we already mentioned, heritagization is fraught with political tensions: Who is given power to determine which elements among the many that constitute the culinary practices of a community deserve to be given special attention and support? What are the interests and motivations at play in the heritagization process? Which stakeholders are involved in the process, and which are excluded from it? What kind of expertise is valued and what kinds of knowledge are instead discounted? And what happens to the traditional ingredients, dishes, and practices that do not get included in the heritagization process? Once gastronomic heritage is identified, what initiatives are adopted to increase its visibility and cultural appreciation? What policies should be put in place?

Transdisciplinary collaboration among actors with different backgrounds, skills, and experiences is essential to addressing the “wicked” aspects in the identification of gastronomic heritage as well as its subsequent management. Contrasting points of view highlight aspects of the issues at hand that could otherwise be ignored, making the tensions among contrasting agendas, values, and needs visible. A broad variety of stakeholders needs to be involved in these processes, which, of course, makes any decision-making process longer and more complicated and, in turn, risks hindering the momentum of new initiatives in terms of civic support and financial funding [47,48]. The co-production of knowledge has been proven effective in fields as diverse as the environment and healthcare [49,50]. Stakeholder participation can also contribute to the identification, documentation, and celebration of gastronomic heritage, at times through the approach known as “citizen science”, in which the public is involved in scientific research [51–53].

Our hypothesis is that design offers tools to foster the inclusiveness and transdisciplinary collaboration that are necessary to understand gastronomic heritage and to effectively operate in it. In recent decades, design has moved from dealing solely with the materiality of objects and spaces to more intangible aspects of human life, such as experiences, relations, processes, services, and systems [54–56]. As a consequence, design

has developed tools that can also be used to intervene in the food systems [57–59]. In our study we focused on participatory design in particular, as a tool towards the effective management of gastronomic heritage, as we consider it specially apt at fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders with vastly different priorities, needs, and values. This approach is further discussed in the methodology section.

1.3. *The Gastronomic Heritage of Spain*

To assess the effectiveness of participatory design theories and methods in fostering the transdisciplinarity that we believe is necessary to address the complexity of gastronomic heritage, in March 2023 we organized a two-day pilot workshop at the New York University site in Madrid.

Like other countries in Europe, Spain has seen a growing interest in traditional cuisines, and artisanal products that can be categorized as heritage. However, its particular history and the existing tensions among regional, national, and linguistic groups within its borders make the Spanish case unique, as transpired during the Madrid workshop. Domestically, gastronomic heritage is increasingly perceived as a key factor in highlighting local identities, stimulating economic development in both urban centers and rural areas, and supporting the growth of sustainable tourism [60,61]. National initiatives in this sense include the launch of a Food Diplomacy Guide (*Guía de la Diplomacia Gastronómica*), an interdepartmental discussion group on gastronomic promotion abroad (*Mesa de la Gastronomía*), and *Restaurants from Spain*, a certification scheme that aims to certify restaurants abroad that are representative of the country's cuisine and food products. At lower levels of government, cities, provinces, and regions in Spain have also created successful programs aimed at promoting their food with the help of specialized marketing and branding agencies. Associations of producers, from olive oil to wine, constantly promote their activities both domestically and abroad. Many Spanish products, from *morcilla de Burgos* (a sausage made of pork meat with the addition of blood and rice) to *Manchego* cheese and *Jerez* vinegar, are now protected by Geographical Indications within the European Union's legislation framework. Highly mediated festivals such as *Madrid Fusion*, *San Sebastian Gastronomika*, *Alimentaria* in Barcelona, and the *Food Design Festival* attract the interest of food lovers and professionals from around the world.

From the point of view of cultural strategies to preserve its gastronomic heritage, in 2010, Spain joined Italy, Morocco, and Greece to successfully inscribe the Mediterranean Diet in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2016, it transpired that Spain was ready to present the candidature of *tapeo* (going for *tapas*) for inscription in the list [62], and in 2022, the same happened for the *cider* industry in the Asturias region [63], but the processes have not come to fruition yet. The Real Academia de Gastronomía and the Fundación Española de la Nutrición promoted the previously mentioned 2014 European Parliament resolution on the cultural and educational components of European gastronomic heritage, making it more relevant at the national level. The Ministry of Culture of Spain has also provided small grants to support projects related to gastronomy, but no funding has yet been allocated to regular work in this field, and food is not mentioned in the Ministry's Intangible Heritage Plan [64]. Despite these initiatives, so far, the cultural aspects of gastronomic heritage appear to attract less investment than its economic and touristic elements.

Whether the lack of cultural focus and investment is the cause or not, the combined efforts to support and promote Spain's gastronomic heritage abroad do not seem to be having the expected results. During a series of interviews conducted in preparation for the Madrid workshop, experts and stakeholders in the field frequently voiced frustration about a perceived lack of international visibility and prestige of Spanish gastronomic heritage, especially when compared to other nearby countries like France or Italy. However, they expressed satisfaction towards the successful export policies that have increased the worldwide appreciation of gourmet products like *jamón*, wine, and extra virgin olive oils from Spain, and celebrated the global fame of Spanish fine dining chefs such as Ferran

Adriá, the Roca brothers, Andoni Luis Aduriz, or Jose Mari and Elena Arzak. At the same time, some of the interviewees pointed out that this visibility of high-end products and chefs may work well to promote Spain as a destination among tourists with high spending power, while it does not necessarily increase the overall appreciation of Spanish gastronomic heritage. Interviewees also pointed out how specialties like tapas, paella, and sangría have become so popular that they have evolved in ways that erase their Spanish origin: for instance, it is not rare to find Korean or Mexican tapas in restaurants around the world, with the word *tapa* almost becoming a synonym for finger food. Moreover, certain confusion exists among consumers between Spanish food from Spain and Hispanic food from Latin America.

During our interviews, different reasons for the perceived lack of visibility and prestige of Spain's gastronomic heritage were presented. A hypothesis that our interviewees voiced is that Spanish emigration has not been as massive as, for example, Italian emigration, which provided a built-in market for the export of Italian products, and later, a large pool of restaurant entrepreneurs making Italian food familiar all over the world. These reflections are supported by scholarly research: Italian migration abroad provided, at first, massive numbers of consumers of Italian products abroad who later turned into informal ambassadors and food entrepreneurs for Italian cuisine [65,66]. Our interlocutors also noted the historical prominence of French haute cuisine around the world, until recently considered the only standard for fine dining, and the global ascent of Japanese cuisine. Research provides some explanation for our interviewees' observations: French cuisine, especially in the fine dining version that became popular around the world from the nineteenth century, could count on a well-structured corpus of techniques, ingredients, and dishes that were taught systematically to future chefs who moved abroad, opened restaurants, and turned into spokespersons for and importers of fine and prestigious French products [67]. Japanese cuisine boasts a more recent success, as it was able to raise its profile within a relatively short span of time [68] and it is now considered not only refined and exciting, but also healthy and nutritious. Some of our interlocutors remarked how national governments, such as those of Korea, Thailand, and Peru, have launched massive gastrodiploacy initiatives meant to raise the profile of their national cuisine while educating foreign consumers and supporting restaurants abroad. Research in gastrodiploacy supports such observations [16,69].

Another possible reason that our interviewees offered to explain the current state of Spanish gastronomic heritage is that Spanish cuisines are profoundly regional and that as a consequence, it is difficult to promote the food of Spain abroad as a unified and easy-to-summarize whole. Beyond bread, olive oil, and wine, there are hardly any ingredients or dishes that are homogeneously shared across all of Spain's territory. The strong identity of regions like Catalunya and the Basque country, which have at different times expressed a desire for greater autonomy or even political independence from Spain, were also mentioned as a challenge. Some interviewees raised the intensely social nature of some food-related practices in Spain, such as *tapeo* (hopping from bar to bar for tapas) and the Sunday meal, which are communal activities to be shared with friends and family and that cannot be easily reproduced elsewhere; in other words, consumers abroad are exposed to Spanish food without being able to experience its spirit and its emotional value. In fact, some interlocutors pointed to the boisterous nature of Spaniards and the inherent fun of many food traditions, which may come across as too intense, noisy, and confusing for some foreigners.

The legacy of Spain's mass tourism is another of the reasons suggested to explain the lack of prestige of Spain's foods abroad. According to our interlocutors, hordes of low-budget tourists, attracted mainly to its sun and beaches, have been exposed only to a lower level and very limited gastronomic offering, mainly via hotel buffets and establishments of questionable quality in the most popular areas of the Coast. This gastronomic scenario, sustained since the explosion of Spain's tourism in the 1960s, would explain why segments of the public abroad with lower spending power—who still constitute the majority of

visitors—may associate Spanish cuisine with an affordable but not very refined fare, despite the global success of Spanish chefs in the fine dining sectors and their media visibility. The result, as some interviewees noted, would also be that foreign consumers may not recognize high-quality exported Spanish products as Spanish. Spaniards' diminishing familiarity with their own traditional ingredients and culinary practices and their embrace of globalized, mass-produced products were indicated as other possible causes of the diminishing visibility of Spain's gastronomic heritage, as many visitors arrive in Spain only to find a highly globalized food scene. Finally, the opinion was voiced that economic activities in agriculture and artisanal manufacturing do not provide many opportunities for a steady and satisfactory income, especially in the depopulated rural areas known as "España vacía" ("Empty Spain"). For some of the interviewees, the consequence of this situation is that food production currently has low cultural and social prestige, such that young generations do not want to stay in their elders' businesses and no intergenerational transmission of knowledge and know-how takes place, threatening the survival of many food production practices and traditions.

2. Research Methodology

From this cursory examination of the concerns outlined during our preliminary interviews, it seems clear that the identification, support, and global promotion of Spanish gastronomic heritage present themselves as "wicked problems" entangled in environmental, cultural, social, economic, political, and trade issues. In order to assess their causes, understand their current dynamics, and imagine different futures, diverse categories of stakeholders need to be involved. The need for transdisciplinarity in this scenario emerges clearly, as does the need to identify tools that can facilitate such transdisciplinarity.

Participatory design has emerged as especially appropriate to facilitate this kind of collaborative dynamic. By participatory design, we refer to an approach that originated in Scandinavia in the 1970s and the 1980s as a way to involve workers in the decision-making processes taking place in their places of employment, especially regarding the introduction of new technologies [70]. As Spinuzzi explains it, various methods are used in participatory design "to iteratively construct the emerging design, which itself simultaneously constitutes and elicits the research results as co-interpreted by the designer-researchers and the participants who will use the design (. . .) Participants' co-interpretation of the research is not just confirmatory but an essential part of the process" [71] (p. 164). Moreover, he notices how the process "must be conducted iteratively so that researcher-designers and participants can develop and refine their understanding of the activity" [71] (p. 164). As the participation of the stakeholders increases, they may embark in co-creation to generate new ideas and reshape older ones that can give rise to shared decisions and applied initiatives [72].

The Madrid workshop was precisely meant to test whether participatory design and co-creation processes could facilitate dialogue and collaboration among very different actors that are not necessarily used to interacting with each other. To do so, the two organizers (and authors of this article) invited eleven participants that fell in two broadly defined categories: "experts" and "designers". As this was a first pilot study, the number of participants was kept intentionally small in order to foster conversation, participation, and co-creation among individuals that at times had never met before. The interviews before the workshop, which were recorded in order to allow for subsequent analysis, allowed the organizers to make decisions about the participants; some of them were selected among the interviewees while others were invited in order to reflect a variety of stakeholders.

The two organizers were a food studies scholar with experience in collaboration with food designers and an expert in cultural management, with applied research experience in the field of food heritage. The seven individuals selected to attend as "experts" included leaders in cultural, touristic, and commercial institutions ranging in scale from the regional to the national, as well as representatives of producers' associations. These experts interacted with five designers with previous experience in food-related projects but different approaches and outlooks on how to intervene in food systems.

During the two-day workshop, experts and designers, together with the organizers, were invited to reflect on the Spanish gastronomic heritage and, in particular, on its visibility and promotion abroad. The focus on a clearly delimited and applied aspect of Spain's gastronomic heritage was meant to make the process manageable in the limited amount of time available for the workshop and to motivate engagement from the experts, who struggle in this particular area on a daily basis.

To foster participation and cocreation from the start, the organizers invited the designers to provide suggestions on the workshop planning and activities before the actual event. Accordingly, the structure of the workshop sessions was intentionally left flexible in order to adapt the schedule and the discussions to the interests and reactions of the participants, while integrating any emerging insights and ideas in the design process itself. This initial discussion with the designers also resulted in the decision to send the workshop participants a set of preliminary questions to reflect on a few days before the workshop. These questions were based on the themes and issues that had emerged during the preliminary interviews and interactions between organizers, experts, and designers. To further foster a climate of co-creation, it was also decided during the discussion with the designers to ask each participant to bring an object that, for them, represented the core values of Spanish gastronomic heritage and to explain why they had chosen that particular object and what it conveyed, both factually and emotionally. This approach in the design of the workshop also reflects the participatory design methodologies that we wanted to test during the workshop itself, in that it combined the knowledge of a variety of experts and required successive iterations in order to build a prototype (the workshop itself).

The participative process that took place during the actual workshop sessions was organized following the design thinking methodology: after identifying the issue at hand, participants in the design process are supposed to empathically explore it, developing insights that give rise to ideas and strategies that can be prototyped and put to the test. The process can be iterated in order to refine the various solutions and to select the best one for implementation, during which further learning can take place, generating new insights and ideas to integrate into the design process. Following this approach, the first session in the two-day workshop focused on discussing the preliminary questions that had been sent to the participants, as well as on sharing reflections on the objects chosen as meaningful in terms of Spanish gastronomic heritage.

These activities generated insights that became the focus of a second session, a brainstorming session during which the organizers and the designers were tasked with reflecting on the issues voiced by the experts and generating proposals that would be shared with the experts the following day. This brainstorming session produced an innovative and inclusive framework for the promotion of Spanish gastronomic heritage abroad that was presented to the experts the following day for discussion. After feedback and critique from the experts, the participants were divided into small groups for creative sessions meant to outline possible practical applications of the framework. During the following and last session, the organizers and designers assessed the workshop in terms of process, effectiveness, successes, and failures.

All participants agreed to have the work sessions videorecorded and transcribed for the purposes of this study, according to the guidelines on interactions with human subjects, which were previously cleared by the NYU Institutional Review Board. It was decided not to videorecord the meals to stimulate informal interactions among the participants and prime them for collaboration. For this reason, all the meals took place in a separate room without recording devices. After the meeting, the session transcriptions were used to prepare a preliminary report that was shared with all the participants in order to elicit feedback on the workshop and further reflections on the themes that had emerged.

3. The Workshop

During the opening session, the participants shared their reflections on the questions they had received previous to the workshop, as well as the meanings and emotions that

they associated with the objects they had brought. This initial discussion confirmed the relevance of the themes that had emerged during the interviews and the interactions that had taken place before the event: the need for the Spanish gastronomic heritage to achieve the same visibility as other cuisines, as well as the perceived contradiction between on the one hand the apparent lack of knowledge of Spanish cuisine at the global level and on the other hand the international fame of numerous Spanish chefs, the success of their products, and the ubiquity of some dishes. Agreement was expressed on these topics, despite different points of view and a certain defensiveness from those more involved in existing promotional initiatives. However, what immediately became apparent was the complexity of the politics and policies regarding gastronomic heritage, due to conflicting objectives and the power struggles at play.

The original goal for the following brainstorming session had been to create tangible proposals for initiatives that could be put in place to promote Spain's gastronomic heritage abroad. However, after observing the political tensions that seemed to be blocking collaboration among participants, the designers decided to concentrate on devising a new framework. The result would be an innovative approach to raise the profile of Spain's gastronomic heritage in an inclusive fashion, which would allow stakeholders with different ideas and values regarding the Spanish national project to feel represented. In order to highlight the commonalities among the cultural and political communities in Spain, the new framework would prioritize shared practices and know-how rather than localized ingredients, products, dishes, or objects that may be strongly associated with specific areas. The new framework would not discount or overlook already-existing initiatives and the previous work of the experts, but would rather provide additional tools.

The designers' proposed approach was to present Spain's gastronomic heritage as a combination of what they defined as "culinary worlds" (*mundos culinarios*), for instance, the world of boiling, stewing, and slow cooking in pots, which require the use of spoons (*cucharas*) to eat, and the world of conservation, including methods like canning, curing, salting, and drying. The identification of such worlds was meant to foreground the similarities that exist across different communities within Spain, cutting across regions, languages, cultures, and administrative borders. Moreover, the embodied nature of these worlds, based on practices and know-how, presents opportunities that allow shoppers and restaurant goers abroad, as well as foreign tourists visiting Spain, to actively participate in them rather than passively consume them. Such experiential participation would give them the opportunity to also partake in the cultural and social aspects of Spanish gastronomic heritage that our interlocutors found frustratingly elusive and that nevertheless constitute such a central part of Spanish culinary identities. The culinary worlds could be translated into experiential booths at food fairs, hands-on culinary events, multimedia exhibitions, virtual reality, video games, and other interactive forms of communication.

During the second day, the prototype of the "worlds" framework was introduced to the experts, a phase that inherently constituted a sort of first test for the new framework that designers had prototyped the day before. To ensure the participation of our experts and to overcome the tensions that had dominated the open discussions on the first day, the designers arranged for this presentation to be conducted in small groups in which both designers and experts would be represented. Next, the participants shared with the whole workshop the observations, doubts, and critiques that arose during the group work. It was in this phase that pushback was voiced, pointing again to conflicting interests, needs, and priorities, as well as practical difficulties in terms of funding, political support, and well-established practices that are difficult to change.

To test the possibility of incorporating the pushback into the framework proposed by the designers, the participants worked again in different small groups to develop ideas for possible interventions. This ideation session resulted in the outlining of three possible interventions aimed at raising the visibility and the profile of the Spanish gastronomic heritage. The results of this ideation session were not meant to be immediately applicable,

but to test the potential of the new framework in generating applied innovations and interventions while fostering participatory co-creation among experts and designers.

One of the proposed interventions consisted in a transmedia package for an international streaming platform. The main product in this package would be a TV series about the diversity of Spanish gastronomic heritage in which each episode would deal with one of the “culinary worlds” outlines in the framework developed in the workshop. The TV series could be connected to a website with additional culinary content, live-streamed events, and an app aimed at bringing users closer to the social and cultural rituals and meanings of each “culinary world”. Another proposal focused on a logo with a QR code that would provide users with an entryway to the “worlds” of the new framework while allowing different stakeholders (communities, producers, institutions) to present their own culinary landscapes. The QR logo could be applied to product labels in stores and also made available at key entry points (airports, cruise ships, trains, boarding passes, highway rest areas near borders, etc.), corners in supermarkets, as well as hospitality and cooking schools. The third idea revolved around the creation of a network in which affordable establishments that embody the practices of Spanish gastronomic heritage would be identified and acknowledged, generating ties with the stakeholders closest to tourists (hotels, hostels, travel agencies, etc.). The establishments that meet the network’s criteria would be identified through a filter on international restaurant search platforms (The Fork, Trip advisor, etc.) and through Google Maps, making it available both at tourists’ places of origin and in Spain.

4. Findings and Discussion

The Madrid workshop was meant to introduce design approaches to stakeholders ranging from researchers to representatives of producers and public servants at different levels of local, regional, and national administrations. In our preliminary interviews, stakeholders both in private and public organizations operating in various aspects of gastronomic heritage showed little familiarity with design ideas, methods, and practices. The experts’ general perceptions of the role of designers appeared limited to graphics, objects, spaces, or even performances or events, while showing a certain puzzlement—but also often a positive curiosity—about what design can offer in addressing systemic issues. Designers, on the other hand, responded to motivations and priorities that often differ from those of the representatives of private and public organizations, which they may perceive as lacking flexibility and creativity.

While design is of course not the only tool available to address the political dynamics underlying gastronomic heritage, the Madrid workshop showed that it can contribute to making inroads in the negotiations around its identification and management. The participants were not isolated from the tensions that Spaniards from different communities harbor about what nation, identity, and heritage mean in their country. However, the intentional and explicit focus on participation and co-creation allowed them to collaborate in outlining a framework that was acceptable to them all while taking their differences into consideration. The participants were able to incorporate critiques and straightforward pushback to shape a shared understanding of the framework.

Due to the limited duration of the pilot project, the time dedicated to ideate possible applications of the resulting framework (i.e., to generate pilot interventions for the promotion of Spain’s gastronomic heritage abroad) was limited. However, the acceptance and understanding of its fundamental principles (inclusivity, a focus on shared practices and know-how rather than only on localized products, the valorization of variety and differences in the gastronomic landscape) allowed everybody to work with it without discounting already existing—and successful—initiatives, practical obstacles, financial limitations, and political hurdles. The contribution from the experts who had years of hands-on experience in the field was invaluable, offering an ongoing “reality check” of the viability of the framework.

The Madrid workshop was organized as a test to assess the potential of design, especially in its more participatory forms, as an effective approach to tackling the political tensions that are inherent in transdisciplinary work around gastronomic heritage. Due to its unique internal dynamics in terms of regional identities and local traditions, Spain provided a particularly complex but interesting background against which to test our study hypothesis.

The unfolding of the workshop indicated the advantages of including participants from different fields and disciplines with the goal of shedding light on the various and intermingled aspects of the identification and management of gastronomic heritage. The process also pointed to the centrality of not just multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary, but rather, of transdisciplinarity in tackling these matters, a process that participatory design and co-creation approaches appear to foster and stimulate. The role of designers was crucial in facilitating the brainstorming and ideation phases of the workshop, stimulating the experts to trust the process and let go—at least temporarily—of the strategies of the institutions they represented, while reassuring them that their contributions were appreciated and respected. Professional designers are constantly challenged to operate within what they may describe as “wicked problems”, without definitive and univocal solutions and with the participation of stakeholders with different priorities, needs, and values.

The discussions, the emerging framework, and the proposals emerged as a result of interactions that pushed all participants out of their disciplines, experiences, and comfort zones, in order to focus on shared goals as a way to overcome their differences. However, our pilot study suggests that the involvement of designers in initiatives regarding gastronomic heritage requires some level of familiarity with design and its processes on the part of the other individual stakeholders and entities involved; in our workshop, it was unclear to most experts what design could contribute, as they thought of it as a way to make things look better or to come up with new products. On the other hand, these collaborations can be effective only if designers are acquainted with gastronomy and gastronomic heritage and acquire experience in working on food-related issues [73].

5. Conclusions

Overall, our test study indicates that design methods based on participation and co-creation have the potential to foster and stimulate collaboration among stakeholders in gastronomic heritage, ranging from researchers in different academic disciplines to practitioners in a variety of professional domains. The Madrid pilot workshop suggests that participatory design can fruitfully support the transdisciplinary interactions that are necessary to operate in the complex field of gastronomy and to integrate its numerous components. The workshop format appears effective in addressing the political tensions underlying gastronomic heritage and other aspects of gastronomy. Flexibility in terms of organization and strategies is a requisite in order to make quick changes and corrections when necessary while the design process unfolds. For this reason, it is preferable that at least some of the participants have previous experience in participatory design and, more generally, in design workshops.

The participations of representatives from private and public institutions in such events can make design and its methods more familiar to administrators at all levels, who often are those directly involved in gastronomy initiatives but may lack the instruments to establish collaborations among themselves and with other stakeholders in the field. While designers can play a central role in facilitating these interactions, their previous experience in food-related matters is crucial to better relate with very diverse stakeholders. The growth of food design as a scholarly pursuit and a professional practice will likely contribute to making transdisciplinary collaborations in gastronomy more frequent and constructive.

Future research would benefit from expanding the number and the typologies of participants in design-inspired processes such as the Madrid workshop, including food producers, chefs, hotel managers, and other categories of people involved in the day-to-day shaping of domestic debates on gastronomic heritage. When devising activities meant

to increase its visibility and prestige abroad, other actors should be included, such as governmental trade agencies, cultural and diplomatic institutions, buyers and distributors, shop owners, retail chains representatives, and media operators.

While this pilot project focused on one country (Spain) and on a specific aspect of gastronomy (gastronomic heritage and its visibility and prestige abroad), the outcome of our workshop suggests its effectiveness in other contexts, above all in terms of the elaboration of innovative, inclusive, and democratic approaches. Similar workshops could be organized in other countries where gastronomic heritage is embattled or where great diversity in terms of the racial, ethnic, religious, or social composition of a national community make finding common ground difficult, especially to avoid erasing the voices and the interests of disadvantaged, underrepresented, or minority groups.

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Informed Consent Statement: Participant consent was waived. The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver of consent, because if even one single participant decided not to be recorded, the organizers would not have been able to record anybody. However, participants were notified about their GDPR rights, according to EU law. No personal information was requested from the participants except for their name and their professional affiliation. Participants took part in the workshop in their professional capacity.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy reasons. Organizers and participants agreed that the workshop recordings would not be made public, but their content would be used to conduct research and to present it in public events.

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