




# FROM EARTH TO TABLE

**WORDS BY VICTOR ZARB**  
*ITS FOOD PREPARATION AND PRODUCTION LECTURER*

**Creating innovative tableware  
for innovative food concepts**



One of the latest and most fascinating culinary trends

that has evolved recently, is the collaboration between chefs and potters/ceramists in creating innovative, handmade tableware made out of clay. I have conducted this research to further explore the dynamic that exists between chefs and potters/ceramists, and the story behind the fusion of distinctive artistry and craftsmanship. This trend is gradually attracting not only those involved in the hospitality industry and the world of ceramics, but also the public in general, especially dining customers who are 'hungry' for new experiences.

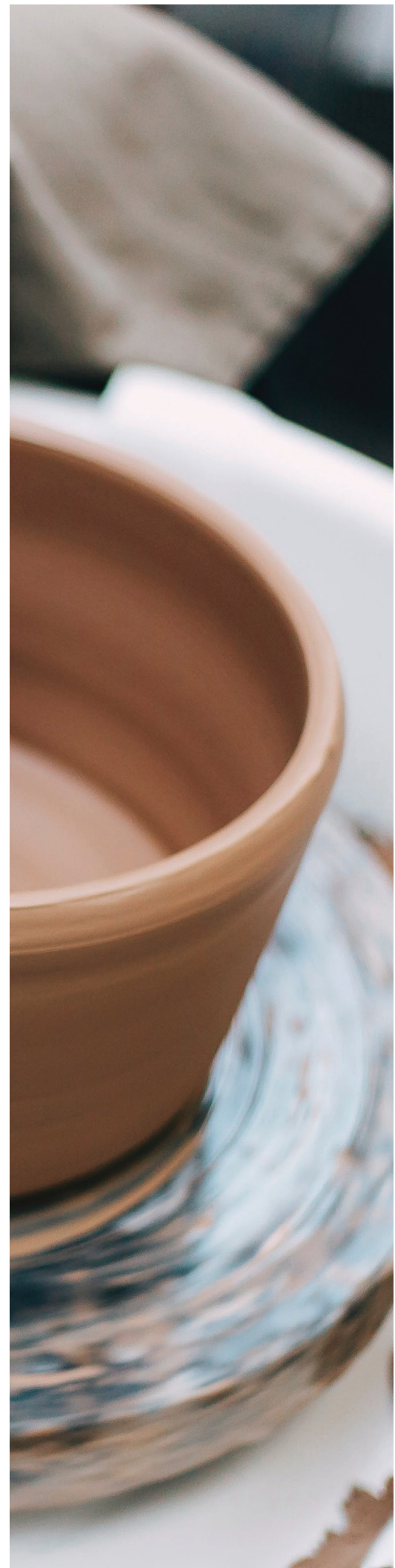
My enticement to conduct this research stemmed from a group assignment as part of the requirements for my master's thesis, where I had discovered the dynamic collaboration between chefs and potters/ceramists in creating innovative, handmade tableware made out of clay. This fired personal interest, since I am a chef by profession and also a culinary lecturer. I consider myself to be a motivated, detail-oriented, progressive chef with an increasing appetite to create innovative recipes, yet rooted in a personal reverence to basic, traditional, and artisanal cooking.

This collaboration would never have been possible if it were not for the versatility of clay. The word clay is derived from the German word *kleben*, which means 'to stick to', and is considered to be a stimulating, versatile medium, with a malleable physical

property that allows endless design possibilities for potters and ceramists (Warshaw, 2007).

Chefs, potters, and ceramists have always had a long-standing relationship with food and cooking. There was no distinctive role, recognition, or identity between the chef, potter, or ceramist, due to the fact that clay artefacts were made according to cultural necessity. Spataro & Villing (2015) have explained that when ceramics first appeared in Neolithic Europe, there was a struggle in the identification of a 'cooking pot'. However, this explanation was contradicted by Saul et al. (2013, cited by Spataro & Villing, 2015, p.5), when they revealed that the discovery of charred food crusts on a small number of pots produced evidence for meat fat, fish and spice, sustaining early indications for a relatively sophisticated cuisine.

My journey in experiencing the hands-on production of these plates started with the discovery on social media, that a number of chefs in Malta and abroad were designing and creating their custom-made ceramic bowls/plates, in collaboration with potters/ceramists. This idea was so appealing to me that I managed to locate a particular potter/ceramist who was already collaborating with local chefs and restaurateurs. I decided to contact this potter/ceramist and during our meeting, we discussed the idea for my thesis, where I expressed my wish, that apart from just writing about the collaboration between chefs and potters, I also wanted to experience it first-hand.





Avocado Bowl



Soup Bowl



The Blue Plate

The potter/ceramist suggested that I provide the designs for the plates to be commissioned, and eventually my designs were artistically transformed into two ceramic bowls and one ceramic plate.

Eventually, when I visited the studio, I started off immediately by carefully explaining in detail my objectives for this collaboration. Obviously, the discussions about the process of developing and creating the ceramic plates took priority. I provided the potter/ceramist with drawings of my initial ideas for three flary creations, which consisted of two 'bowls' and one particular plate. Out of these three, one bowl would be specifically used for soup. The other bowl and the plate could be used interchangeably, in the sense that although intentionally they would be created for main course (Blue plate) and dessert (Avocado bowl), they could also be used for several variations of food presentations be it a starter, main course or dessert. This also included the fact that the food could be served either hot or cold.

I requested both bowls to be created with some form of 'hollow structure'. My main objective for this idea was not only for the purposes of the originality of the elevated shape and material, but also to enhance an innovative customer experience during service. The waiters would hold and safely carry the plate with both hands slightly placed in the hollow structure area provided, before presenting it to the customer. In my opinion, this would also stimulate the service staff in being part of a whole new experience.

### THE AVOCADO BOWL

On one particular bowl, I also

expressed my desire of creating an additional area for cutlery, meaning that, apart from having a 'hollow structure', it would also include a small groove on the face of the bowl, that would hold the fork or spoon. I called it the avocado bowl, (figure 1) for the simple reason that I wanted the containing part of the bowl to be in the form of half an avocado. I was inspired by my obsession with avocados and having lavishly included them in many of my menu creations, I was also inspired to design a handmade bowl reflecting its shape.

### THE SOUP BOWL

The other bowl, which would be created specifically for serving soup, apart from the 'hollow structure', a portion-sized pourer would be included, which would be fitted in a grooved slot at the side part of the bowl. Also, for this innovative soup bowl I requested a small hollow area on the plate, to be able to present the soup accompaniment (e.g. croûtons). The primary concept for this idea, is not just for the customers to have the honour of pouring the soup themselves, but also for having the accompaniment presented on the same bowl. This would create an emotional, personal service experience at their own pace. I suggested to the potter/ceramist that I would like to have it in a sandy colour, since most of the soups on the institute's restaurant menus, were prepared mainly in vivid and dark colours, and so to highlight the effect on contrast.

### THE BLUE PLATE

Finally, there was the round plate, which was originally designed for the main course. I called it the 'blue plate',

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**The restaurant resonates with awareness in this moment: handmade tableware meets the finest cuisine... the generous gesture of serving food becomes illuminated in the moment when handmade tableware and culinary art converge**

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since my initial concept was to serve fish or seafood on it. The innovative concept I wanted to include in this plate was an embossed pattern on one part of the plate. In my mind I had two interpretations for this concept. The first option was to present the knife and fork on the embossed pattern, leaving enough room for the food to be presented on the remaining area of the plate. The second option was for the purpose of presenting the main joint (e.g. chicken, beef, lamb, fish etc.) on the embossed pattern of the plate, so it would hold steady while the customer is using the cutlery. On the other hand, the rest of the condiments including sauces could be presented on the smoother part of the plate.

Also, I discussed with the potter/ ceramist about having the edge of the plate slightly curved and elevated, but this was just a matter of personal preference.

The main objectives for my personal interaction with the local potter/ ceramist were to really and truly understand what the chefs and potters/ ceramists are experiencing, and also to gather feedback as part of my data collection, where I presented these innovative handmade plates to the dining customers at one of the institute's restaurants, furthermore evaluating their responses through questionnaires. This was also beneficial for the learning outcomes of my culinary students, since they were directly involved in the plating, therefore motivating them to form part of this innovative experience that could offer new culinary opportunities in their future, whilst also inspiring them to view the important aspect of tableware *vis-à-vis* their food presentation.



Photographs by Sue Mifsud

## REFERENCES

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