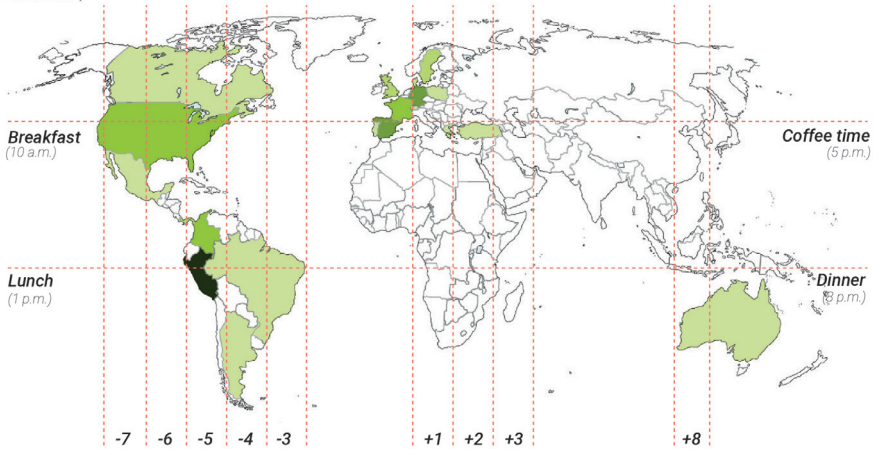
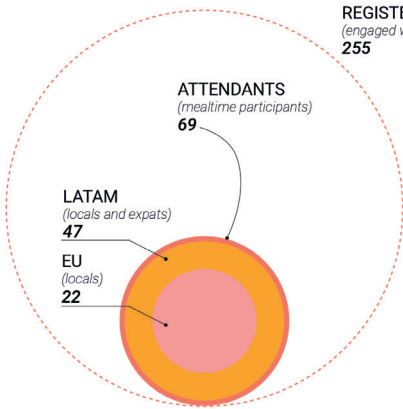


MEALTIMES ZONE
(GMT table match)



QUARANTINED SOBREMESA
(Global tables, guests and hosts)



REGISTERED
(engaged with the topic)
255

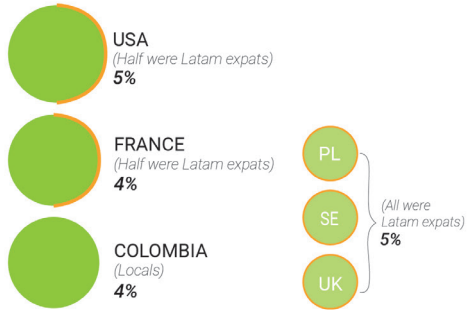


TABLE GEOLOCATIONS
(intimate global group)

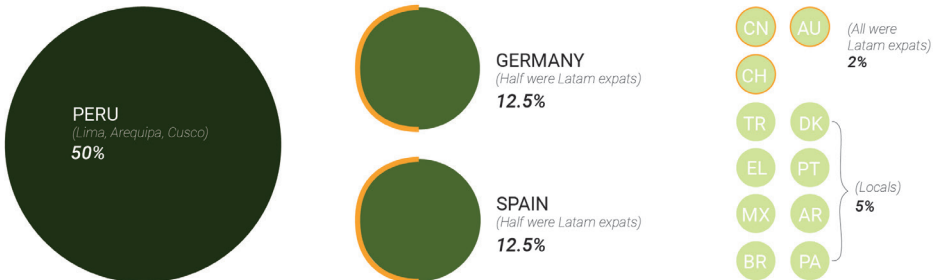


Figure 1. [OS] Tables and mealtimes geolocation. Source: Designer archive, 2020.

QUARANTINED SOBREMESA

Gabriela Aquije Zegarra

This paper looks into the challenge of adapting a Sobremesa (familiar eating ritual from Latin American culture) into a digital platform. Along the design process, Quarantined Sobremesa [QS], weaves the methodological approach of Speculative design and the interdisciplinary research of Food Systems. In the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, this digital mealtime provided an interactive platform for different actors and commensality backgrounds across the lockdown globe. Overall, this experience suggested how a meal could be a joyful and critical medium to allocate our everyday eating habits in the bioregional food systems. Consequently, the narrative of this text will articulate a theoretical research review, qualitative data and participant observant notes from [QS], as well as news and journalist information.

food systems / speculative design / foodways / digital medium / bioregion



Figure. 2 [QS] Digital sobremesa invitation answers. Source: Designer archive, 2020

HACKING A SOBREMESA, DISCONNECTING TO CONNECT

Quarantined Sobremesa [QS] project started in the second week of March 2020, during global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world began to slow down, as daily habits and tasks squeeze inside households across the globe. This context triggered that two designers¹ in two different countries, Peru and Germany, started sharing lunch (Latin America) and dinner (Europe) breaks “digitally together” (Washington Post 2020). As a matter of fact, this idea emerged in different cities and geographies simultaneously, as a way to replicate the eventful eating gatherings that the quarantine had taken away (EAT 2020).

When we (creators and designers) named the project Quarantined Sobremesa [QS], we mistakenly assumed that everyone had experienced a Sobremesa. Whereas there are similar commensality practices around the globe, the sobremesa ritual is still rooted in Hispanic and Latinos communities as part of our everyday food culture and spoken language. In the case of Peruvian culinary culture, even the greatest chefs aim to emulate a food experience that “feels like home”, for the act of hosting with care family and friends, set the table and serve the “especialidad de la casa” (household special dish) that is typical of a “sobremesa peruana” (Myopia 2017). This intimate eating tradition sets the stage for “the time after a meal where the family [and friends] may sit around a table and discuss with each other. It is a

time for reflection and discussion and a time to simply be immersed [...]" (Perez 2010, p. 28). Thereupon, with hunger in the heart, we set this eating ritual re-enactment as a design challenge. (Fig. 2)

Hence, during the course of three months and five editions, [QS] evolved from a support system, between friends overseas during early quarantine days, to a digital mealtime format, which mediated a horizontal conversation between international strangers. In other words, we hacked a real *sobremesa* to exchange food and topics with a global community online. By engaging with over 200 people (Fig. 1), the experience passed through several adaptations, although the core structure remained as follows:

- A shared mealtime: the scheduled gatherings had to fit, overall, Latin America and Europe typical meal hours (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) and time zones. Appealing to food as an empathy tool, for one hour you 'set the table' to eat together during the digital encounter. Although, along the process, we learn that having a plate of food for the session was optional.

- A topic: after the first couple of sessions, we noticed that participants with a common interest had a smoother table talk (*sobremesa*) and even continued the conversation after [QS]. Thus, often the host suggested a topic and a certain mealtime schedule, which was communicated one week in advance at the registration form and the Instagram social media account of the [QS] project. It is crucial to mention that the topic acted as a conversation trigger that could open up a horizontal dialogue. This talk could derive into a rich debate but did not aim for a webinar-type of exchange.

- An intimate global group: as any good gathering, there is someone who takes care that everyone has a good time. At first, we (designers) filled that role, but as the community grew, former participants assumed this caring duty. The group size depended on the quorum of the topic proposed during registration week, as well as the language available for conversation. On average, we would have one to three hosts, around three to seven guests and at least two different nationalities/geographies sitting in one table (mealtime and topic).

- A digital medium²: an element that is the convergence of technological and creative tools to carry out a digital *Sobremesa*. The hardware was a stable Internet connection, an email account, and a virtual chat room (Google Meets). The software was a restaurant/hosting use of language in all our communication canals (email, Instagram, Google forms, WhatsApp) to the point of even creating a reception space where a greeter welcomed you to the experience and promptly redirected you to the selected table. Also, we adapted analogue

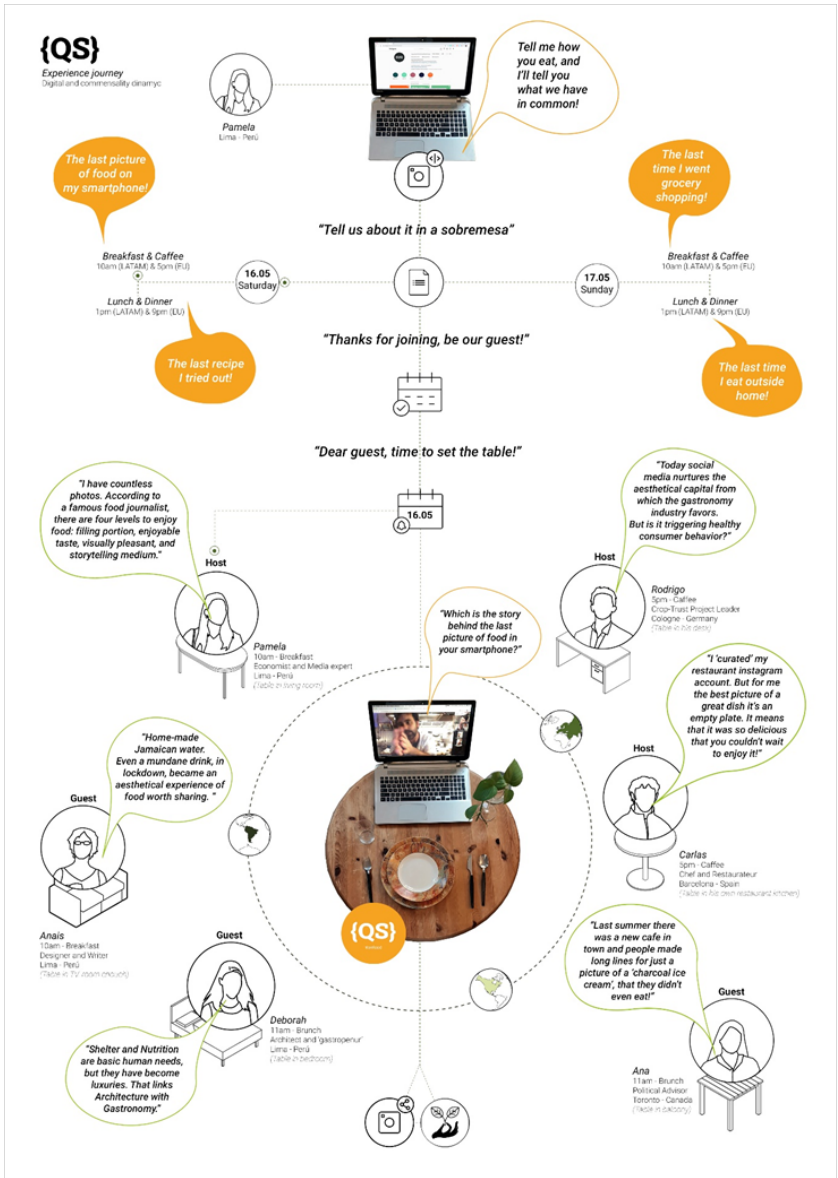


Figure 3. {QS} Experience journey. Source: Designer archive, 2020⁵

elements of the dining environment to a careful set of indications such as table setting or register the host's meal preparation to communicate "how to prepare for a Sobremesa". (User Insight Workshops 2020)

DESIGNING A TABLE IN THE QUARANTINED FOOD SYSTEMS

We need to situate the [QS] team and project at the intersection between the research realms of Speculative Design and Food Systems³. The first realm enables designers to evaluate and generate debate around new objects or technologies. According to Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl when "inviting participants to engage in issues that emerge when things are already in use" we apply speculative design as a method for "designerly public engagement". Thus we foster the participant agency "to [an] inventive problem making in their own everyday life" and encourage them "to shift the parameters of an issue or a concern". (Lindström, Ståhl 2016, p. 187)

In the means of adapting a dining cultural ritual to a digital platform, we understood that we would need to readapt hardware and software of [QS] to respond to our users' concerns and geographical backgrounds. In most of the cases, this digital mealtime became an "out of the quarantine-ordinary moment" in which a conversation with a global stranger refrained their perspective on a certain topic. In others, the topic brought together long-distance friends for a "digital reconnection to their country of origin through table memories" (User Insight Workshops 2020). As in a real-life Sobremesa, the household (designers) only has control over the table setting, not on the guest's behaviour or spontaneous interactions.

The second research realm emerged as we became more familiar with the pandemic context, its impact in our everyday life eating habits, and even more acquaintance with the digital versions of public engagements (Nielsen 2020). Onward with this new lockdown environment and due to the empathetic nature of the interaction we were able to build a global network of commensality. Whereby we touch upon, direct and indirectly, the subject of Food Systems by looking into eating habits and cultural "foodways"⁴. According to the Food System Dashboard there is "a large body of nuanced research on consumer behaviour", and among the key elements to understand it are forms of food exchange (FSD 2020). Consequently, by the fifth edition of [QS], we wanted to reflect on food as our medium and make it our main topic. By inviting specialists and enthusiasts to a sobremesa we approached the Food systems discussion through an affective—nonetheless critical—human connection.

Taking on Lindström and Ståhl, “[...] invitations have always been important as a way of articulating an area of curiosity, and a proposal of how to engage with it.” (Lindström, Ståhl 2016, p. 190) Therefore, we named the edition: “Tell me how you eat and I will tell you...”, and complemented it with four storytelling abrebecas (trigger topics): “... the last picture of a meal in my smartphone”, “...the last recipe I tried out”, “...the last time I went grocery shopping”, “...the last time I eat outside home. Each abrebeca had a global table and mealtime, which debated each quotidian material and space dimension of the food systems and the effect that the pandemic had on it. (Fig. 3) First, the picture opened up a discussion on food, communication aesthetics, and globalised eating practices. Then, the recipe led to childhood ‘doing cooking’ memories, food waste-conscious, and pantry cooking. Later, grocery shopping developed a debate on gastro politics, food access, and market informality. Finally, addressing eating outside turned out into an open debate, about the restrictions and changes in public behaviour. (Sobremesa Dynamic 2020)

Food was the thread that connected, not only hosts and guests that interact in it but also their food network and cultural behaviour. (Fig. 3) There were many moments in which “the collective debate intuitively touched upon an ecological reflection of their eating habits, and that was truly meaningful” (User Insight Workshops, 2020). Accordingly, the journalist and designer John Thackara introduces this ecological thinking as “bioregioning”, which re-connects our every day with the living systems that support it. He also urged designers to take up the role to connect diverse groups of actors inside the bioregion by designing for system change, creating platforms that give priority to human-nature knowledge exchange, for “[...] the practice of ecology is the forging of relationships.” (Thackara 2019, p. 21)

SOBREMESA CONCLUSION

In this short essay, we have presented the design challenge of Quarantined Sobremesa and how it reunites the cultural and caring cohesion of the household dining format with the ‘foodways’ of a global community, along a digital medium. Based on our experience, we can conclude that digital platforms helped us bridge huge physical distances, and—although its limitations—can quickly open a window into other global realities and become a space for dialogue. Also, that by linking our ‘digital tables’ we could understand how the cultural and ecological networks of our meal connect to each other. Consequently, we believe that a cohesive local and global community is crucial to reinforce ecological thinking inside the post-COVID Food Systems.

Thus looking ahead, could this project that started as a digital meal-time exchange bring awareness on the link between our tables and bioregional Food Systems? We certainly learned during the prototype phase of [QS] as much as from the cultural background and everyday hacks of our food-savvy digital community. So moving forward we would like to develop a co-creative 'digital commensality' incubator for critical food design projects. Thus continue to set the table for creative knowledge-exchange between transdisciplinary actors inside the local and global Food System.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 [QS]Project Co-creators: Gabriela Aquije, Anais Freitas Eléspuru, and Diego Polo Chávez.
- 2 Food and digital mediums have a variety of ways of interacting, some beneficial and other adverse. One that can relate to the [QS] platform is 'digital commensality', which includes "[...] a number of scenarios, from physically eating together with someone as a result of some digital technology-based intervention [...] while eating, [...] as well as more elaborate tele dining installations that allow for some element of interactivity with those whom we may be dining with remotely [...]" (Spence et al. 2019, p. 2).
- 3 Within the Design Research realm there is also a specific—and rather young—niche of practice-based theory named 'Food Design', by the Italian design scholar Francesca Zampollo, which relates design with transversal concerns from the realms of Food Studies and Food System research (Zampollo 2017, p. 3). The subcategory of 'Critical Food Design' (Ibid. 2016, p. 7) uses speculative design strategies and explores inside (but not exclusively) the problematics of Food Production Systems. Nevertheless, the design-thinking methodologies of Food Design, according to the mentioned author, are often applied to food product or service development, which are not main concerns of the presented [QS] experience.
- 4 "In fact, human foodways are a complex result of the interaction of human nutritional needs, ecology, human logic or lack of it, and historical accident. [...] They construct their foodways within limits set by biology, economics, and psychology." (Anderson, 2005, p. 2)
- 5 The vectorised icons were designed by Lluisa Iborra from the Noun Project [open source platform]. Available at: <https://thenounproject.com/marialuisa.iborra/>

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