

Adapting Queer Foodways

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As a community activist, I take pride in creating, promoting and supporting queer safe spaces through food with small business, This Queer Kitchen (TQK). Last May (2019), my time was spent coordinating drag queen cookie decorating classes, organizing chefs for queer cooking demos, and securing venues for our queer womxn in food bimonthly potluck series. This April (2020), my days are filled with uncertainty and my event calendar is currently blank. Unfortunately, TQK was shy of its first birthday when, on March 20th, New York governor Andrew Cuomo signed PAUSE, which stated that all nonessential gatherings of any size must be canceled. As TQK is a company that relies on physical spaces such as restaurants, community centers, and galleries to function, COVID-19 has directly impacted our business model, thereby leaving us with no choice but to adapt to an entirely new set of boundaries. We realized a new perspective of the food system was needed for our business to prosper post-COVID-19.

There has been a decline in food literacy—a general knowledge of where food comes from and how it is produced—among urban populations, which has cultivated general ignorance about our food system (Thompson 2015). However, staring at your plate renders the truth as clear as day: the food system relies on minorities, such as Queer, Trans+, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (QTBIPOC), to function as a whole. A substantial amount of the food industry’s farmworkers, factory workers, activists, line cooks, and chefs happen to be queer, but due to systematic oppression and lack of census data, there is limited information available to support this claim. Yet as someone who is not only queer but also works in the food industry, I have experienced this firsthand. QTBIPOC and other minorities suffer from the negative impact of layoffs or hazardous work in times of crisis which increases their chances of becoming ill. Often this can be attributed to discrimination. Now, those who often feed others as a source of joy and comfort are at a loss as to how to feed themselves.

There is one initial detail you notice when you’re part of the queer community: the queer network is expansive yet tight-knit and over time becomes your chosen family. By the end of the first week, local organizations were setting up mutual-aid funds for trans+/GNC (gender non-conforming) folx alongside mental health resources like the Jackson Heights LGBT Center volunteer hotline. Organizations such as Food Issues Group (FIG) are donating meals specifically for those in the queer community. TQK jumped into action by streamlining our marketing strategy, dedicating our landing page to COVID-19 food resources—which contains advice on how to support affected queer businesses and where to acquire food—and instead of promoting our usual event-focused media, began posting about how to give and get assistance. When this was complete, the pure shock set in and I took a step back to empathize with our community and also to evaluate how TQK should proceed.

It wasn’t until the third week of quarantine—and sleepless nights—that I realized TQK’s goal would be less about how we would create connections and more about addressing the need for connections themselves. Throughout the last year, we’ve fostered timeless relationships through in-person events that translated to an online community. When the time finally came for our first socially distanced event—which turned out to be an intimate queer happy hour and check-in with casual conversations around distinguished orange wines and sourdough-starter undertakings—I still was struggling with motivation and the pressures to create something accessible and meaningful for our queer food ecosystem. Luckily, the feedback was positive and a few days later our direct messages were full with questions about whether we would continue to host online events.

About a week later, an individual reached out to collaborate on an event with a self-love and sexuality coach. We determined this event would be the perfect opportunity as a trial for hosting more virtual programming. The collaboration came to fruition

as a cooking demo where I wrote and tested a recipe, created a graphic, and finagled with the Zoom platform. During the live session, I explained the use of a mortar and pestle, demoed a pantry-friendly pesto, and discussed the importance of creating safe virtual spaces. Through this we learned that even when physical space is absent, it doesn't mean the community isn't flourishing. From here, we pivoted to an online structure and shifted our focus from being a social outlet to a resource for comfort, nourishment, and support.

Now by the eighth week of quarantine, we've been collaborating with LGBTQA+ community centers and organizations to curate queer food programming. Our event calendar for June is filling up. We have Instagram takeovers featuring conversations with queer and QTBIPOC chefs, online queer cooking and food writing classes, and even a date for our beloved drag queen cookie decorating. Regardless of the format, we hope to foster a very much existent safe space for support and well-being.

The queer community as a whole is reverting to its roots to understand how food is intrinsic to creating connections.

We finally live in a world where queer literary magazines such as *Jarry Mag* and queer culinary experiences like Jaynes Beard and Babestown exist. Likewise, there are collectives dedicated to trans+ body and food positivity such as *Queer Anga*. The creation of this symbiotic relationship between food and our chosen families is of particular importance: we work with it, we learn through it, and we love through it. Having taken the time to examine what TQK was doing previously, I noticed that community was an idea rather than the epicenter of our work—but now that has changed. Behind the scenes, we're focusing on shifting our mission, with hopes of starting a foundation focused on providing for New York City's queer communities. We plan to facilitate workshops centered around educating line cooks, understanding food and mental well-being, and using food as a tool for economic autonomy. Some days I think we aren't going to be able to make it out of this. When will it be safe to congregate, cook, and connect again? The light at the end of the tunnel is understanding that the queer community is fueled by passion, willingness, and commitment to each other, with food at the forefront. 