

On the politics of working with food



Artist and chef Amanny Ahmad discusses what drew her to food as her primary medium, why what we eat constitutes a kind of universal language, and how even a cookie recipe can be deeply political.

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As told to Jasmine Lee, 3183 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Food](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#), [Politics](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

You identify as an artist first and foremost. What do you do for work?

It's true. I'm an artist. I cook and do food-related things. I cook at private parties sometimes, or I do my own "pop-ups," though I really hate to use that terminology. I've also called them called "residencies," but lately I've been throwing a portmanteau in my head, "chefidencies." The term "pop-up" reeks of consumerism, which isn't the point of my food. It's not about acquisition of wealth and object, it's about experiencing something temporarily. That feeling can stick with you for longer, but it can't be stored or appreciate in value. I approach food as a medium to communicate my ideas, and this is a newer way of doing it. There isn't a formula or a prescribed way of how to approach it.

There's been a turn in art and in mainstream culture towards food. Why do you think that is? I know you mentioned the toxicity of culinary institutions, within kitchens and things like that, but what about art institutions?

I've removed myself from the art world in the last few years, not that I was ever an integral part of it. My last year at Cooper Union was spent divorcing myself from art production and feeling disenchanted by the landscape, post graduation. I turned to food unintentionally. It made sense for me because of my interest in immaterial works and non-commodifiable objects. Those kinds of constraints, I think, are really difficult to work around, but make things successful or interesting.

Food is beautiful and interesting and we all need it and want it and have different connections to it. It's another language that people are tapping into. I see it from a linguistic perspective, a vocabulary that I can structure, rearrange, and evolve to communicate more, differently. And I think that is how it functions socially as well, for the average human, regardless of what characteristics define them. My peers and I use it as a tool to communicate ideas about colonialism, cultural violations, social issues, etc. We use it seriously. Food can be multi-faceted and nebulous in its iterations and intentions, but I think when people do it without intentionality, when it is reduced to this strictly aesthetic thing, then it becomes problematic to me. I think people immediately want to talk about an artist like [Birkrit Tiravanija](#), who represents the foundations of food and art—he's the first go to for anyone talking about cooking in a gallery or art space.

Obviously we think about relational aesthetics, but I don't necessarily think that's the conversation we're having right now. We've moved past that. And I think that's because of the political climate—the way that people are conscientious of race, injustice, social issues, and the way that people are aware of those things and are working overtime to combat them through every available medium. It's in the front of everyone's minds. People are using food as reclamation and a stamp of ownership, at least amongst a lot of my peers. It's different.



What are you trying to say with your food?

Different stuff every time. I think that regardless of what or how I'm cooking, or who I'm cooking for, whether it's my own "chefidency," or a private party, or a wedding, or whatever it is... whether it's a pay-the-bills thing, or a donate-the-money thing... I always try to operate under certain principles that are in line with my ethics and morals of how I want things to be in the world, especially as far as sourcing and hiring. That's another reason I enjoy working with food. It creates an opportunity where I can dictate the terms under which I operate. I don't have to participate in fucked-up systems because I make my own systems. That's a luxury and a privilege and I try to be respectful of that and be as much of what I want to see as I can. For me that's the main thing.

There are obvious limitations to what you can do as a roving chef. Would you ever like to have your own space?

The only kind of restaurant I ever think I would want would have to be on a beach somewhere, where I could do whatever I wanted, open and close whenever I wanted, and no one could ever Yelp me. No rules. Everyone I know who has worked in restaurants has advised me against opening one. I'm not knocking on anyone who chooses that, or considers that their passion, it just isn't what I am driven by. It's a furthering of those conditions we were talking about, long hours, low paying, the pain in your body. I don't need that. It's a thankless job, and people are underpaid, it's such a struggle.

People always complain about how much food costs. Good, quality food is expensive. Good, quality people are expensive, and people should be paid what they're worth. Dishwashers have the most important job in the fucking kitchen. They should get paid well because that job sucks and without them everything else falls apart.

Some of my peers and I have talked about creating a community kitchen space that we can all use. For example, a lot of times after these food events there's so much left over, like there's four crates of beet tops, but at the end of a huge event you're too tired, and the last thing you want to deal with are those beet tops. We've talked about having a communal space where that food that's left over from productions can get funneled into a more helpful avenue. Maybe it gets put into a café that's at the prep space where people can come in and buy, or maybe there's a way to donate it. In New York you can't donate open food to homeless shelters. You can't donate anything other than sealed processed foods. Think of all the productions that happen in New York City where no one eats anything and boxes and boxes of food just go in the trash. I'm interested in opening up a space like that, way more than opening a permanent restaurant.

Tell me more about your time in art school, and when you finally said, "Fuck this."

For my senior exhibition, I was really interested in immaterial works and trying to figure out what that even meant and how people were using that successfully as a way to make things. Photography is a part of that for me, as document mostly. My senior year I was in my painting class with my teacher, who is a very serious painter. He was very gracious with me because I just slowly devolved into doing every kind of painting I could that didn't involve paint, until I got to a place where I was presenting him with a jar of paint scrapings off of my pallet as a painting, and being like, "Alright, here."

I was throwing around ideas in my head about entire spaces and how you create an environment where every sensorial thing is addressed. Its sound, smell, sound, touch, taste, and all of the things. Food came into it because my mom was coming to New York for my show, and I had her cook so much labor-intensive Palestinian food wrapped grape leaves, and this dish called maqluba, a layered casserole dish that you flip upside down. It's the most iconic Palestinian dish. We made a 30-foot-long table, loaded with all this food, and had food hanging from the ceilings. It was all things that were really nostalgic for me growing up in Palestine, and the food I would have when we'd go to the Arabic stores in America. That was the only way I knew how to share those things. It felt really imperative to me that that was a part of it.

That's what I really identify with and admire about your work. It can be hard to reconcile these things that are so problematic, that the art world is rife with. You found that you were hitting a wall when you were in school. Was it the audience, or was it just not working for you?

Trying to reconcile my feeling of obligation to say or do something about my actual life experience and the way that my family exists or experiences the world—trying to reconcile all that with my privilege and education... Some people can just not deal with that part of themselves. I'm not judging them, but for me it was definitely hard.

I've said this before, but for me and the art world, it was kind of like being in a shitty relationship where you just keep trying to make it work. "Maybe if I do this differently..." But it just doesn't fucking work. It's unfulfilling. So much about art production, the art world, and that exclusionary way that it inherently exists, is so antithetical to my perspective on life. I just felt like a joke. I was just like "You don't believe this, why are you doing this?" The only time I was happy at school was when the janitor would roll by my studio and be like, "What's that?" If he was interested in it, I felt like I was doing something right.



Dips from my Palestinian Dinner Residency held at The Dimes Deli in NYC July 2017

There's the art world that we know—it's institutional and based on a kind of education without which you aren't able to understand most contemporary art. It therefore makes it so alienating to 99.5% of the population on earth. To me, art is a language, and it ought to communicate to the largest number of people possible. If you have to understand Foucault to be able to understand a painting, how many people can understand it? Obviously some, but most people don't. That seems so exclusionary to me in a way that I don't accept.

With food, you don't need an education to understand it. It's not inherently steeped in classism. Obviously there are levels and types, but ultimately it's not. For me that's why food became so fulfilling, because all that other stuff is a fool's errand for me. Having to rely on these systems that don't appeal to me for my livelihood, none of that works. With food, there isn't a formula for how it works. There are no rules and no one to be like, "This is how it actually is. This is how you need to do it." It's like, no one fucking knows.

Tell me about some of the people you've met through your work.

Through researching the Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library, I found out about Vivian Sansour, the woman who runs it. I decided to support her through some of my dinners. On my last visit to Palestine I got to meet her and see what she was doing. She took me out to this village to give seedlings of heirloom varieties to farmers. Seeing that part of the community and how the seed bank actually functions was really important to me.

For me to meet other Palestinians I can relate to on some level was also really important and interesting for me, because I don't have a Palestinian community aside from my family. I don't really know Palestinians who exist in the same spheres as I do or have the same interests that I do, or relate to the world in similar ways.

Food is also creating that for me, where I now have a lot more Palestinians with similar experiences who come to my dinners, or hit me up on DMs or write me an email or whatever.

Is the work that Vivian is doing through the Seed Bank seen as a very political act?

I think it's still under the radar. They don't really care, because they're like, "What are you guys planting? Your eggplants? Cool..." It is so political. That's what's so interesting.

I was having this conversation with someone earlier today, actually, about this cookie recipe. There are these molded and stuffed Palestinian cookies that I made for a holiday party. A chef friend of mine was in Japan and he wanted my cookie recipe because he found these molds there and wanted to try it. I said, "I'll give you the recipe, but only if you call it a Palestinian cookie." He was like, "No," so I didn't want to give him the recipe. But he was joking, and I was like, "Yeah, but you can't joke with me about stuff like that, it's serious." It's a privilege to not have to think about that.

It is crazy that a cookie recipe is political. Planting Palestinian eggplants versus a regular eggplant is political. The fact that I'm carrying these seeds as contraband, and if something were to happen to the ones in Palestine, I will have the only seeds left of these varieties. It's so cliché but the amount of life within a single seed to create more life...

It's like some Mad Max shit.

I know, it really is. That's why food is so political. As an artist, a lot of things pique my interest. Food is an anchor for me, because I can use it in so many ways that appeal to all of my needs. It can be about this really political thing, where I can research the origin of one particular plant and how every culture uses that plant. That can be a whole series. That alone is one book, or one dinner. Or, I can take it down a notch and make a dinner that's just really beautiful. That appeals to a different side of me, but the core values under which I create those things are still under the umbrella of how I source my food and how I treat people, etc. That's why I think it works for me. Not everything has to be political. The core of it should be, though, and you should still be socially aware and whatever. I don't cut corners so I don't make as much money as some of my peers.

It's also important to me to not limit myself to be like, "I'm a Palestinian artist that makes Palestinian food only." That's not me. I'm a person that's a lot of things. That's just part of who I am. I don't want to ever just be the girl that makes Palestinian food. I'm a person that makes things.





My cousin Yunus picking Mulberries in the Occupied West Bank, 2013. He has now been held by Israel in prison for over a year without trial, for throwing rocks at occupation forces in our village

Does that freak you out, to be put in a box like that?

I am just really resistant to it. I definitely mix it up, and I don't just do Palestinian events. I do my Solstice Dinner every year which has nothing to do with being Palestinian. I do Palestinian-specific things, or then I just do things. People ask me, "What food do you specialize in?" I'm like, "I do a lot of Palestinian food but I also do a lot of other things." I don't know, I cook everything, I cook whatever interests me. Last night I cooked a bunch of Thai-style stuffed whole snapper wrapped in banana leaves, but I just cook good food (hopefully).

I think people have a tendency to want to pigeon-hole anything. They tend to only understand things by the parameters that they apply and the kind of limiting language they use. They can only handle three adjectives to describe the thing.

In my work of trying to elevate this platform for Palestinian people and Palestinian food, I have experienced people not wanting to write about it or not being interested in writing about it. Food editors my age, or a bit older, are interested in social justice—they're out there at the Women's March. But then they're not covering Palestinian food events, or culinary colonialism, or apartheid platforms that are being addressed through food.

I try, with my platform, not to make it a conversation about being anti-Israel, but make it a conversation about empowerment and making it pro-Palestinian, which are not the same conversation. Being pro-Palestinian does not mean that one is for the eradication of all Israelis—that's not logical. There are obviously many people now who have been born there and that's where they're from. You can't undo that. I don't want to take those people's homes away from them either.

At a certain point you have to consider this several-million-strong population of people who are just suffering. People don't want to acknowledge that. It's this incongruence that's so appalling because of neoliberals and social justice warriors, and the blind spots that they have. It's something I've talked about before, where in the food world there are women chefs or other chefs who want to talk about certain issues but are quiet about other kinds of human rights issues. To me that is the intersectionality that is missing.

I work with [Neftali Durán](#) who is a part of the I-Collective. I was just in Detroit working with him and a bunch of our peers. We had a panel on how we use food as a form of healing trauma. Neftali calls it "culinary synergy"—how we all work together and make each other's food, but because it's brown people making brown people food, it's just culinary synergy. We're not colonizing. We're just all in the same struggle.

How does that feel when you guys work together?

Great, I love them, everyone gets it and we're all doing similar things for similar reasons. It's like my struggle is their struggle and their struggle is my struggle. I support them and they support me. We're on each other's levels. That's the intersectionality and the support that people really need. It's about more than just your gender or your sexuality or skin color—it's about all of it, and truly being for everyone.

It's that classic quote: "Injustice everywhere is a threat to justice anywhere." If you're down to turn a blind eye, then why are you surprised when everyone else turns a blind eye to your struggle?



Cooking my annual Summer Solstice Celebration Dinner at 99Scott in Brooklyn, 2017

Amanny Ahmad recommends:

[The Shazam app](#)

Activated Charcoal

Drinking more water

Mexico in general (food, people, music, language, etc)

Caring more about beings that are different from you

[Name](#)

Amanny Ahmad

[Vocation](#)

Artist, Chef, Writer

