Food Memories: Exploring Intangible Cultural Heritage Through Embodied Storytelling

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Abstract

Food is one of the most powerful ways we remember. A smell or a taste can bring back a grandmother's kitchen, a family celebration, or a place we left behind. Yet in HCI and tangible interaction, food is mostly studied in terms of efficiency, nutrition, or eating habits, and much less as a means of remembering. This studio is a full-day, hands-on workshop for 10–15 participants to explore food memories and culinary heritage through the body and the senses. In the first part, participants share a dish that matters to them and make visual maps of the people, places, and rituals around it, using paper, magazines, and other craft materials. In the second part, they write about the sensory details of their memories and then work in groups to imagine a "future recipe" for the same dishes, 50 to 100 years from now. Throughout, facilitators use a digital companion App to collect photos and notes, and we reflect together on where it helps and where it gets in the way of the room. Participants leave with a method they can adapt for their own research, teaching, or community work.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Human computer interaction (HCI)*; *Interaction design process and methods*; *Collaborative and social computing*.

Keywords

Embodied Interaction, Tangible Interfaces, Cultural Heritage, Narrative inquiry, Workshop facilitation, Prototyping, Usability

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1 Motivation and Theoretical Grounding

In social sciences and food studies, memories as embodied and sensed are most commonly understood to be "activated" through food. A classic example is Proust's madeleine–encountering the taste and texture while eating a madeleine activates vivid memories and nostalgia. Returning to a particular food (for example, after moving to a new country where it is no longer available) can become a very powerful moment where memories about one's upbringing, values, or identity come to the fore. In food studies scholarship, food memories are highly significant because they reveal individual and collective identities and experiences through ordinary acts of smelling, tasting, and feeling [8, 13, 15]. Another element of food memories is that they are activated not only in consumption acts but also when people are making food. Food knowledge and memory are "embodied", meaning that memories are activated through tacit and non-verbal activities of preparing a dish, or using specific materials or tools [11, 17].

Related to developing a methodology for activating food memories is the question of *what they do*. In other words, food memories are non-neutral and produce senses of identity, mark moments of difference or similarity, highlight community values, and create connections or frictions between groups [8, 14, 17]. The **Food Memories methodology**, supported by a digital companion app for facilitation, activates connections between participants and the broader concept of "culinary heritage" [10, 16]. In contemporary European contexts, culinary heritage is fragile as younger generations encounter diverse global cuisines [6]. Rather than treating these encounters as a loss of tradition, this methodology uncovers how new generations understand heritage through food stories [10]. While food memories evoke the past, they also enable future-oriented speculations about eating, cooking, and social connection [3, 7].

Methods for food memories represent concrete design opportunities where spaces, materials, stories, social dynamics, and cooking activities can be purposefully arranged to support basic research, community programming, and education. To capture these reminiscences and autobiographical narratives, we draw upon narrative inquiry and thematic methods [9, 18].

Food is inherently multisensory, embodied, and social [10]. However, research in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Tangible, Embedded, and Embodied Interaction (TEI) mainly addresses cooking efficiency, nutritional tracking, or eating behaviours [1, 4], leaving a gap in designing technologies and methods that support the act of *remembering* through food [6]. Shifting focus from functional consumption to autobiographical remembering opens a design space for tangible interaction that leverages physical materials and sensory triggers to bridge past experiences with present communities [8].

This Studio addresses the absence of memory-focused food research in tangible interaction by introducing a structured methodology for using food as a medium for autobiographical remembering, community building, and speculative design. This work explores how the remembering body occupies, navigates, and transforms physical and social environments—from the intimacy of a kitchen or dining table to a shared room [5]. Our main contribution is a practical workshop format that pairs hands-on crafting materials with a digital companion app. This approach gives facilitators a structured way to guide group reflection, capture sensory narratives, and archive participant-created maps and speculative recipes in real time [12].

2 Studio Proposal

The *Food Memories Studio* is a full-day, in-person, hands-on session in which 10–15 participants collaboratively explore the entanglements between food memories and the sensorium. Sensory experiences evoke and shape memories, and memories often condition how we perceive, interpret and engage with food. Together, they contribute to create knowledge that is enacted through everyday practices, gestures, etc. This studio situates culinary heritage in the intersection of these two modes of knowing and proposes a creativity-based methodology that uses embodied and multisensory narrative-based activities to create speculative future scenarios about culinary heritage. The studio is organised into two interconnected modules: *Remembering Through Food* and *Envisioning Culinary Futures*.

In ***Remembering Through Food***, participants will be given a series of prompts to first activate individual memories related to food, recipes or dishes that connect with a sense of belonging. Second, through creative practices such as drawing, doodling, collage, and multisensory decoupage, they will be asked to create visual maps including materials, people, spaces, and moments of conviviality that represent their individual and/or collective food landscapes.

For ***Envisioning Culinary Futures***, participants will be guided through two exercises, one of which is a reflective, free-writing exercise that uses creative mapping to dive deeper into the memories and the sensorium that was activated. Participants are encouraged to focus on a sense, a dish or a recipe and work through how everyday practices hinder or enable culinary heritage as embodied knowledge. The second involves a group-based speculative exercise: generating a "future" recipe based on how their collective materials and narratives can be gathered into a vision about what a recipe that relates to their identity and meanings may look like in the future–however imagined or distant.

Following each of the modules and exercises detailed below, participants will be guided by facilitators through a group discussion.

2.1 Remembering Through Food (*Module One*)

- ***Memory Activation:*** The session begins with the facilitators introducing themselves and inviting participants into a safe space to share a particular dish, recipe, or moment of conviviality that holds meaning for them.
  - *Duration:* 10 minutes.
  - *Prompts:* "Share with the group your favourite food, dish, or ingredient."
- ***Food Memory Map:*** This activity asks participants to create a visual map of food, people, places, and rituals. Originally, this was designed as an individual task, but we realised in previous pilot tests that conducting the mapping as a group exercise or in pairs was more conducive to sharing and finding common ground (Figure 1, left and centre).
  - *Materials:* Large sheets of paper, spare food magazines, markers, pens and pencils, Post-it notes, scissors, glue.
  - *Duration:* 30 minutes.
  - *Prompts:* "Where did these foods appear?"; "How did they look, smell, feel, or sound?"; "How did they make you feel?"

2.2 Envisioning Culinary Futures (*Module Two*)

- ***Sensory Reflection (Sensory Writing & Everyday Eating):*** Participants write a narrative that describes the sensory details of their individual food memory. The facilitators then lead a discussion on "Everyday Eating" to link past memories to present food habits, discussing how traditions change over time and how modern constraints affect current cooking practices.
  - *Materials:* Journals, pens, and sensory vocabulary prompt cards categorising descriptive words for colour, aroma, shape, texture, and taste.
  - *Duration:* 60 minutes for writing; 30 minutes for discussion.
  - *Prompts:* "How would you describe its taste, smell, texture, or colour?"; "What emotions or stories surround it?"; "How does this dish appear in your life today?"
- ***Future Recipe:*** Participants work in groups to identify common ingredients or dishes in their stories and imagine how a shared recipe might evolve 50 to 100 years into the future. The groups identify future environmental or cultural challenges and draft concrete adaptation strategies.
  - *Materials:* Future Recipe Templates (outlining Original Dish, Future Challenges, and Adapted Ingredients) and markers.
  - *Duration:* 60 minutes.



Figure 1: Pictures from a pilot Food Memories Workshop with 8 young participants in Milan, Italy. Left and centre: participants working in groups on their Food Memory Maps. Right: a facilitator running the session with the companion app.

– *Prompts:* "What dish or ingredient appears across several stories?"; "What social, cultural, or environmental changes could affect it?"

2.3 Discussion Phase

Following the activities, participants will be asked to respond to several prompts related to: 1) the outcome of the activities and what they learned; 2) the challenges they encountered; 3) the relationships between food memories in individual reflections and group activities; 4) how the digital companion application (detailed below) affected or supported the studio space, activities, and goals.

2.4 Future Memories Companion App

Throughout the activities, facilitators will use the companion app to assist in running the studio (Figure 1, right). Participants will also be provided with a QR code to join the facilitator or workshop digital "room" and can add photos or notes to the device. A brief overview of the app will be shared at the beginning of the studio.

2.5 Food Memories Development Journey

Following the studio, organisers will share early findings and explain the development of the companion app as a facilitation tool used for supporting embodied, spatial, and personal dimensions of food memories. Organisers will also discuss current directions and plans for the method and the companion app, as well as some of the materials generated from previous pilots and workshops conducted primarily with young students and professionals in Barcelona (Spain), Roskilde (Denmark), Galway (Ireland), and Milan and Turin (Italy).

2.6 Learning Goals

The *Food Memories Studio* aims to demonstrate and test the relationship between food memories activation, a facilitation environment, and the digital companion with TEI attendees. Participants will explore how food memories activate sensory, embodied, and speculative understandings of *collective and personal experiences with food*, and how outputs can be framed as future-facing. Through hands-on activities and group discussion, they will:

- Identify and articulate elements of their own culinary heritage, including memories, rituals, and practices transmitted through family or community.
- Apply strategies for tracing and documenting the culinary heritage, including sensory description, memory mapping, and narrative reconstruction.
- Develop relational knowledge by understanding food traditions of other participants and reflecting on similarities, differences, and shared cultural traditions.
- Engage in speculative and creative thinking about future food practices, sustainability, and emerging culinary rituals through the collaborative creation of a future recipe.
- Critically assess the role of a digital companion in embodied and shared settings, identifying where it supports facilitated activities and where it disturbs the spatial and social dimensions of the room.
- Adapt the methodology for new contexts, such as education, integration programs or arts-based practices.

3 Materials to be Explored

- Crafting Materials (Paper, Magazines, Markers, Glue, Scissors): Used in visual mapping to externalise memory into tangible, shared artefacts.
- Sensory Vocabulary Prompt Cards: Provide structured language for texture, aroma, taste, shape, and colour to help participants articulate non-verbal sensory details.
- Future Recipe Templates: Structured worksheets guiding the translation of current dishes into speculative future adaptations.
- Food Memories Companion App: A digital facilitation tool tested as a system for supporting physical workshop workflows and real-time artefact collection.

4 Schedule

The *Food Memories Studio* is planned as a full-day, in-person event (09:30 to 17:00), including two short breaks and a lunch break. The programme alternates between collaborative and individual activities. The full programme description is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Studio schedule and activity flow.

Time	Activity	Activity Short Description
09:30 - 09:50	Welcome and framing	Overview of the workshop and establishment of community participation agreements.
09:50 - 10:00	Memory Activation	Participants introduce themselves through a dish that holds meaning for them.
10:00 - 10:45	Food Memory Map	Pair-based creation of visual maps linking foods, people, places, and rituals.
10:45 - 11:00	Break	-
11:00 - 12:00	Sensory Writing	Individual narrative writing focused on sensory details, emotions, and contexts.
12:00 - 12:30	Everyday Eating Reflection	Facilitated group discussion on current food habits and evolving traditions.
12:30 - 14:00	Lunch Break	-
14:00 - 15:00	Future Recipe	Group generation of a speculative recipe adapting shared food themes for future contexts.
15:00 - 15:30	Companion App Demonstration	Technical demo and discussion on digital tools for workshop facilitation.
16:00 - 16:30	Afternoon Break	-
16:30 - 17:00	Synthesis and Closing	Group reflection, collection of artefacts, final discussion, and feedback.

5 Supporting Materials

The initial pilot workshops are described in [2] and illustrated in Figure 1. Further materials, such as the Food Memories Manual, examples of pilot memory maps, and screenshots of the companion app, will be shared with Studio participants.

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