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# A Knife, a Fork,...

## *Culinary intermezzo*

It's a subject not often broached. Not that there is anything wrong or remotely taboo about it, but cutlery is simply not such a colourful topic. Anyway, it is a Western thing and in terms of worldwide percentage of users, it falls on the side of the vast minority. However, there are definitely some items in this category worth talking about, whether due to their ridiculousness in appearance and-or functionality, or to their downright cleverness and-or allure. The challenge of fashioning cutlery has thus been known to tantalise numerous designers and some interesting variations have thereby been produced. For these reasons alone, DAMn° dares to bring cutlery to your attention.

text ANNEKE BOKERN

Hovering somewhere between basic tool and refined cultural object, cutlery is a hybrid affair. Do we really need it? Probably not. Cutlery is helpful, but not indispensable. It can even be a bit cumbersome. Most knives, being the most essential of the classic troika, do their job, but forks and especially spoons are sometimes quite awkward. After all, it would be much easier to drink soup from a bowl instead of balancing it in a tiny shallow ladle with a thin, long stem, on its way to the mouth. Accordingly, an Italian etiquette book from the 17th century asks: "Hasn't nature equipped us with five fingers on each hand? Why would we want to insult it with those foolish instruments?"

In the end, cutlery is mainly about elegance and keeping up appearances. It describes utensils that answer to our Western sense of hygiene, which deems it necessary to prevent direct contact between hand and food. In this sense, knife, fork and spoon are also a mirror of food culture. After all, millions of Ethiopians are just as happy picking up their food with the help of a piece of spongy pancake. Statistics betray how insignificant our concept of cutlery really is: considerably more people on earth – 1.2 billion versus 900 million – use chop-

© Andrea Ferreol and Philippe Noiret in *La Grande Bouffe*, directed by Marco Ferreri in 1973



Juri, designed by Thomas Walde of Swiss studio Postfossil for their Trattoria Utopia show at the Milan furniture fair in 2011 (above, both images)

Raymond Loewy's cutlery, developed in 1978 for use on Concorde planes, was famously unfunctional (right)

Fina, by Austrian designer Thomas Feichtner for Carl Mertens (bottom)

sticks instead of cutlery, and the vast majority – 4.2 billion – simply eat with their fingers. This last figure would be even bigger if it included all those Westerners who consume fast food on a daily basis.

**Who needs it!**

Even in the Western world, though, cutlery as we know it is a rather new concept. For centuries, people didn't expect to find eating tools next to their plate, but carried a personal spoon and knife with them wherever they went. The fork is a pretty late addition to the set and for a long time enjoyed a dubious reputation as an effeminate extravaganza. "God protect me from little forks!", Martin Luther wrote in 1518, and as late as 1879 they were still prohibited to sailors in the British marines. It wasn't until the industrial revolution brought about mass production that three-part flatware became ubiquitous – and designers became fascinated by its hybrid character and functional intricacy.

Today, according to German producer WMF, the average consumer only buys two sets of cutlery in a lifetime – which says a lot about priorities, but also about durability. "Even with cheap cutlery, it's possible to eat one's fill without hurting oneself", WMF design manager Cornelius Boerner admits. But if the cutlery that we buy accompanies us for half a lifetime and is used nearly every day, it seems wise to choose a beautiful as well as a functional design. According to Austrian designer Thomas Feichtner, we can even develop a very special relationship with knives, forks and spoons: "Over a period of years, cutlery can accrue an emotional value that goes beyond its utility", he says.



One of the reasons for this potential is that cutlery is very closely related to the human body. After all, it's a kind of finger and hand extension, an upgrade of the human extremities. But it's also a complex design task, encompassing not only ergonomics and hand and mouth feel, but also holding and pricking capacity, balance and aesthetics. Even Raymond Loewy failed: the cutlery he developed in 1978 for use on Concorde planes was famously anti-functional, and especially the circular spoons, which called for giant napkins, and not only during turbulence.



**Better and better**

Strangely enough, the circular ladle shape of Loewy's spoon now sees a revival in conceptual cutlery Juri, designed by Thomas Walde of Swiss studio Postfossil for their Trattoria Utopia show at the Milan furniture fair in 2011. The Juri items, however, aren't meant to be functional tools, but rather a comment on our eating habits. Forks with five prongs, and unpolished, chromed steel knives, make eating a difficult task. The three objects come in a sheath that refers to the carry-on cutlery of the Middle Ages, which "makes more sense in today's society, since we often make food and eat away from home", as Thomas Walde explains.

Mobility and space-saving seem to be two big issues in cutlery design at the moment. Although not strictly cutlery, more a nesting set of chef's knives, Meeting by Brussels-based designer Mia Schmallenbach and French producer Déglon also condenses five items into one. "I began with attempting to create a 'better' knife by, for example, trying to develop a more ergonomic handle design", Schmallenbach says, explaining her approach to the task. "I then decided to tackle the problem from a different angle by looking at how I could separate the handle from the blade, but this just proved to be another dead end. After a lot of thinking, I suddenly had a flash of inspiration; instead of trying to separate the knives, why not try doing the opposite and incorporate them into one single unit?" The result is one of those designs that make you wonder why nobody had this idea before.



Some New Things, designed by Molly Anderson, made as part of her graduation project at the Royal College of Art

Meeting, designed by Mia Schmallenbach and French producer Déglon (middle left)

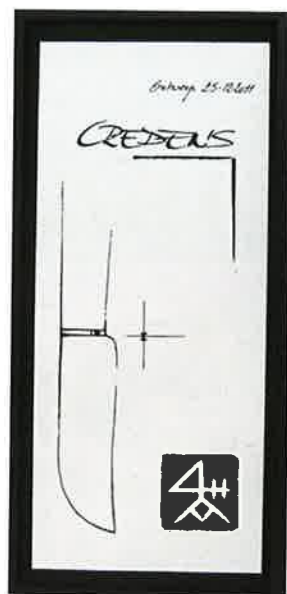
Stamp collection, designed by Tomás Alonso for the Royal College of Art (both images)

**Function or fancy?**

With his Stamp collection for Italesse, London-based Spanish designer Tomás Alonso has also come up with cutlery for a mobile world. Made from stainless steel sheets, the knives, forks and spoons are extremely thin and light. The groove pattern not only provides stability, but also makes the items stackable. Held together by a small steel clip, there's something ascetic and vaguely military about them. In this sense, they emphasise the basic, tool-like side of cutlery. The same goes for conceptual cutlery Some New Things, which British designer Molly Anderson made as part of her graduation project at London's Royal College of Art. With their

hexagonal handles, the pieces – which again, are stackable – seem to be related to pencils, or maybe Allen keys, promising to bridge the gap between plate and mouth with a good grip.

At the other end of the spectrum are new designs that emphasise the cultural value and connotations of cutlery. The Flair prototypes by Swedish design office Contour and the Jardin d'Eden series, designed for Christofle by self-appointed king of exuberance Marcel Wanders, both refer to times when knives and forks were just as lavishly decorated as jewellery. "For Jardin d'Eden, I immersed myself in the history of Christofle",



Wanders says. When he resurfaced, he brought along a set of silverware engraved with a pattern of leaves, flowers and curls. It looks a lot like the stately silverware you would find in your granny's drawer, from where it would be extracted only on special occasions. However, the contemporary twist is that the pattern on Wanders' cutlery covers blades and ladles alike, instead of being restricted to the handles.

With Van Loocke's creations, the troika separates and the knife becomes a solitary object again. But what's probably more important is that his knives speak of a longing for the individual and the meaningful, while at the same time achieving equilibrium between archaic material and artisanal refinement. A basic tool that is just as much a part of refined table culture – and in this sense, is the essence of cutlery. #



Credens knife, designed by Antoine van Loocke, sold exclusively by chef Peter Goossens, Hof van Cleve, Belgium (top)  
Photo: Antoine van Loocke

Dorotea cutlery, designed by Monica Förster, produced by Gense

Flair cutlery, designed by Swedish design office Contour (middle, right)

Jardin d'Eden series, designed by Marcel Wanders for Christoffle (bottom)

**The wild side**

In-between both worlds – that of butch, archaic tools and that of beautiful, decorative tableware – and miles away from every design trend, sits a Flemish artist, who produces knives from recycled materials. Antoine Van Loocke is an autodidact who makes highly individual knives from materials like fire-wrought Damascus steel, maple root wood, musk ox horn or oozic, which is in fact walrus penis. His knives, looking as if they're made for skinning deer in the woods, can actually be found on the tables of Michelin-starred restaurants, where they replace the traditional table knife. Van Loocke's latest creation was designed for Belgian chef Peter Goossens. "I had already made several designs for him in the past. But Goossens was looking for a knife that he could offer for sale to his guests, something special. A beautiful and functional object", Van Loocke explains. The result is potato peeler Credens, a 20-centimetre-long, robust knife, in a limited edition.



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