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The edible city

Gingerbread roads, red pepper buses and a Parliament made of cucumber sandwiches ... Lyn Gardner on a plan to recreate London in food

Lyn Gardner

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'Cooking and eating are acts of love,' says Alicia Rios, the Spanish food artist, psychologist and philosopher. "Mothers spend hours preparing food for their families to share together, and in Spain we tell the people we love that we adore them so much, we could gobble them up. Food is central to everyone's lives. It always means more than just the sum of its ingredients."

For the past 15 years, Rios has been making art out of food and helping communities express themselves through cooking and eating together. When she was invited to make a project at Williams College, Massachusetts, she constructed a library of edible books. Instead of the usual notices banning the consumption of food or drink, people were invited to eat and drink the library, making their way through stacks of volumes on the subject of Spanish food, history and architecture. Inside each book was a transparent box containing the food mentioned in the text.

Rios has previously made rainbows out of lollipops, and edible gardens with cacti fashioned from chilli peppers and geraniums from sausages. She has overseen projects that recreated the beaches of Gran Canaria out of couscous, complete with sunbathing tourists depicted as pink prawns. In London, 10 years ago, she turned BAC into a sensual food playground with a vast theatrical installation in which toy frogs lurked in great bowers of peaches, pineapples and leeks. A flock of plastic sheep looked on solemnly as giggling adults pushed their way through curtains of capsicums and fountains of vegetables, with cascading onions and carrots. At the end, everyone was given bags of food to take home. In our house, we dined off art - slightly mouldy asparagus and bruised tomatoes - for a week.

This week, Rios embarks on her most ambitious project yet: a 3D edible map of London, covering 60 sq m. In Trafalgar Square this Saturday, the truism that there is no such thing as a free lunch will be quashed for ever as passers-by are invited to eat the city on a first-come, first-served basis. Rios calls this process "urbanophagia" and describes it as the citizens' "unconscious desire to devour their environment". Those present will be able to tuck into a Houses of Parliament made of wholemeal cucumber sandwiches, a Royal Court Theatre of toffee apples, a Royal Opera House of chocolate brownies, an Imperial War Museum fashioned entirely out of dim sum and a Lloyd's building made from rye bagels filled with salmon and cream cheese. There will be 20 sq m of gingerbread roads, and London buses made out of red peppers stuffed with rice and olives for wheels.

Produced by the London International Festival of Theatre (Lift), Eat London brings together 200 cooks from 14 diverse community groups across east and south-east London, all of whom have been asked to create a specific segment of the city - including all its major buildings - using the ingredients that mean most to them. "It makes them imagine the city in terms of edibility, to see their everyday reality in terms of texture, taste, colour and smell," says Rios. Her niece, the architect Barbara Ortiz, has worked on the project to ensure that everything is to scale, but it is up to each group to decide how brick, glass and steel structures should be rendered in food.

Two weeks before Eat London, at the Brady Centre just off Brick Lane, Buckingham Palace is being constructed out of Indian sweets by a group of Bengali women as a dry run before the real event. A mashed-potato Queen and Prince Philip wave from the balcony. The women are part of the Coriander Club, a local healthy eating project that meets weekly and cooks lunches that often include ingredients grown nearby at Spitalfields City Farm. Most of the women speak little or no English and seldom venture out of the East End, but they have thrown themselves into the project, spending a day visiting the landmarks they will be modelling and deciding on the ingredients. Fudge and other sweets were chosen for Buckingham Palace because "Indian sweets are very expensive", says one, and because, as another woman shyly confides: "I think the Queen is very sweet." But other buildings have presented more problems. The Treasury will be a dish of vegetable curry topped with circles of carrot to represent money, and Westminster Abbey will be made out of chapatis stuffed

with rice and okra. But not everyone agrees that 10 Downing Street should be constructed from hot green chillies.

"At first I didn't see how we could take part in Eat London," says Lutfin Hussain, the Spitalfields City Farm group leader. "We are experienced cooks, but we don't know how to design buildings. We all thought it would be impossible - but we've learned and it has been fun."

It is not just the cooks who might forge this new relationship: the act of consumption makes everyone a participant in the performance. Choosing which bit of the city you want to eat feels empowering, because by devouring it you can take control of it and make it yours. On Saturday, hot green chillies or not, I'm going to enjoy taking a great big bite out of 10 Downing Street.

When I tell Rios this, she smiles: "What I hope Eat London will do is uncover the unconscious. There is something very powerful about wanting to belong to the city so much that you want to incorporate the city in yourself".

• **Eat London** is a free event in Trafalgar Square on Saturday, from 12.30pm. Details: www.liftfest.org.uk

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