

# Plates, cups and takeaway containers shape what (and how) we eat

June 3 2020, by Abby Mellick Lopes and Karen Weiss

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Home cooks have been trying out their skills during isolation. But the way food tastes depends on more than your ability to follow a recipe.

Our [surroundings](#), [the people we share food with](#) and the design of our tableware—our cups, bowls and plates, cutlery and containers—affect

the way we experience food.

For example, eating from a heavier bowl can make you feel food is [more filling and tastes better](#) than eating from a lighter one.

Contrast this with fast food, which is most commonly served in lightweight disposable containers, which encourages [fast eating](#), [underestimating](#) how much food you're eating, and has even been linked to becoming [impatient](#).

These are just some examples of the vital, but largely unconscious, relationship between the design of our tableware—including size, shape, weight and colour—and how we eat.

In design, this relationship is referred to as an object's "[affordances](#)". Affordances guide interactions between objects and people.

As Australian sociologist [Jenny Davis writes](#), affordances: "...push, pull, enable, and constrain. Affordances are how objects shape behaviour for socially situated subjects."

Designed objects don't make us do things.

## **The colour of your crockery**

When you visit a restaurant, the chances are your dinner will be served on a plain white [plate](#).

But French chef Sebastien Lepinoy has staff [paint the plates](#) to match the daily menu and "entice the appetite".

Research seems to back him up. Coloured plates can enhance flavours to actually change the dining experience.

In [one study](#), salted popcorn eaten from a coloured bowl tasted sweeter than popcorn eaten from a white bowl. In [another](#), a café latte served in a coloured mug tasted sweeter than one in a white mug.

This association between colour and taste seems to apply to people from Germany to China.

A review of [multiple studies](#) conducted in many countries over 30 years finds people consistently associated particular colours with specific tastes.

Red, orange or pink is most often associated with sweetness, black with bitterness, yellow or green with sourness, and white and blue with saltiness.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

## The size of your plate

The influence of plate size on meal portions depends on the dining experience and whether you are [serving yourself](#). In a buffet, for example, people armed with a small plate may eat more because they can go back for multiple helpings.

Nonetheless, average plate and portion sizes have [increased](#) over the years. Back in her day, grandma used to serve meals on plates 25cm in diameter. Now, the average dinner plate is 28cm, and many restaurant dinner plates have expanded to [30cm](#).

Our waistlines have also expanded. Research confirms we tend to [eat more calories](#) when our plates are larger, because a larger capacity plate affords a greater portion size.

## Plastic is too often ignored

The pace of our busy lives has led many people to rely on those handy takeaways in disposable [plastic](#) food containers just ready to pop into the microwave. And it's tempting to use plastic cutlery and cups at barbecues, picnics and kids' birthday parties.

In contrast to heavy, fragile ceramic tableware, plastic tableware is [designed to be ignored](#). It is so lightweight, ubiquitous and cheap we don't notice it and pay little mind to its disposal.

Plastics have also changed how we eat and drink. An aversion to the strong smell of plastic containers that once might have caused people to [wrap their sandwiches before placing them in Tupperware](#) seems to have disappeared. We drink hot coffee through plastic lids.

Australian economic sociologist Gay Hawkins and her colleagues argue

lightweight, [plastic water bottles](#) have created entirely new habits, such as "[constant sipping](#)" on the go. New products are then designed to fit and reinforce this habit.

## **Aesthetics matter**

Healthy eating is not only characterised by what we eat but how we eat.

For instance, eating mindfully—more thoughtfully and slowly by focusing on the experience of eating—can help you feel [full faster](#) and make a [difference](#) to how we eat.

And the Japanese cuisine [Kaiseki](#) values this mindful, slower approach to eating. It consists of small portions of beautifully arranged food presented in a grouping of small, attractive, individual plates and bowls.

This encourages the diner to eat more slowly and mindfully while appreciating not only the food but the variety and setting of the tableware.

Japanese people's slower eating practices even apply to "fast food".

One [study](#) found Japanese people were more likely to eat in groups, to stay at fast [food](#) restaurants for longer and to share [fast food](#), compared with their North American counterparts.

Affordance theory is only now starting to account for [cultural diversity](#) in the ways in which designed objects shape practices and experiences.

The studies we have reviewed show tableware influences how we eat. Size, shape, weight, colour and aesthetics all play a part in our experience of eating.

This has wide implications for how we design for healthier eating—whether that's to encourage eating well when we are out and about, or so we can better appreciate a tastier, healthier and more convivial meal at home.

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