

Rethinking Our Relationship With Food: An Interview With Jeni Hansen Gard:



By James Oliveros

Jeni Hansen Gard is an artist, community organizer, and a beet risotto enthusiast who lives in Macon, Georgia. I spoke with Jeni about her relationships with food, community, art, and the reason her ceramics work best when there's a chance you might break them.

You grew up in a bed and breakfast. Did the daily rotation of the guests foster an appreciation for community engagement and local food culture?

It did in part. It didn't really affect the food side – that was mostly from another experience – as much as it did affect a comfort with strangers and the ability to engage with people. I would have friends come for sleepovers and they would think it was bizarre there were people that I didn't know sleeping in my house. But to me it was such a part of life. I can't imagine what it would be like to grow up without that experience. For the last two years or so, my husband and I had an Airbnb room in our house, so we were still doing it. We started a small artists' group that met every month at our house when we lived in Columbus, Ohio. The house is a site where I do community work.



Lettuce Planter from *Salad Party* (2013)

You had mentioned an experience that had fostered a relationship with food. Was that a specific experience?

When I was about twenty-five years old, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that was triggered by salmonella. It was distributed by the Peanut Corporation of America, which has since gone under. It was the second time they sent out contaminated peanut butter. The first time it wasn't a big deal; apparently no one got sick, but the second time, whoever was in charge decided to just continue distributing instead of taking a loss. Ultimately, people died. I developed this genetic marker, HLAB-27, which makes me more susceptible to a type of arthritis that is in the family of spondyloarthritis.

I did get better, but for several months, I couldn't walk. My entire body was inflamed. There were very few outward symptoms, but there was pain in my spine, hip and neck. I had to walk with a cane for a while. All the while, I was twenty-five years old and a very active, outgoing person. I had flare-ups later so I'm not sure if I still have reactive arthritis, or if I have undifferentiated spondyloarthritis. For the most part, I'm pretty healthy and things are fine, but every now and then I'll have a flare-up and something will really hurt for who-knows-how long. But I thought I was a healthy twenty-five-year old who makes good food choices and doesn't eat fast food, so I must be healthy, right? But after this happened I realized I actually know nothing about my food. It completely changed my relationship with food.

Growing up, I never planted a seed in the ground. I didn't have a garden. I had this very disconnected relationship with food. I grew up eating packaged mac and cheese and microwave dinners. They were staples of my childhood diet, partially because both of my parents worked. Of course I appreciate they were both given the opportunity to work, but at the same time, that shift in the way we function in the US took away time spent in the kitchen by traditional mothers. The food system changed. My parents thought the food they were buying was healthy. They assumed it was what they would have made at home, but it wasn't. It changed behind the scenes. I feel I put a little more intention than the average person into what I eat. To me, that time that I've set aside is totally worth it. I understand the everyday person doesn't necessarily have the time to do that. But my life was dramatically shifted so I couldn't live without doing that. I just know what's important to me now.

I'm glad your health has improved. A layer of difficulty is added by an invisible illness. Advocacy and addressing the lack of representation or support is so important.

It is really hard when people don't see it. It's hard to even believe it. I'm part of this all-women exhibition that's called "*We Are Not Invisible*." It's about all these different physical conditions and disabilities, that some might say are sometimes "invisible."

The privilege of time is an interesting notion, as in "having the time" to do these things that are healthy for us. These ways of making healthy food or being conscious of what you eat are not readily available to many people. Cultivating a community where that's an accepted baseline prerequisite for a functioning society – the idea that you should know where your food comes from – is a radically important thing.

I agree. My grandma always tells me that organic food is a "fad." I'm always telling her, "No grandma, when you grew up, food was actually organic. It changed and they just didn't tell you that it changed." You have to try to convince people of it, they don't believe that it changed, but it did!

That's very true. What is your relationship with local food providers in your community?

Well I just moved, but where I did live, yes, I was connected. The past four or five years, I was based in Columbus. I was able to make connections that were lasting because I was in that community long enough. In the summer we could eat one hundred percent from our garden and the local farmers market. We felt connected to those farmers that we knew very well. I didn't actually work on a farm, but we had something like twenty different tomato plants in our garden and we made an effort to plant things and care for the earth that we had.

But like I said, I just moved so I'm starting over. The community doesn't move with you. It's still rooted in that land where you were. Now, I'm starting again, I just got to Macon, Georgia, and I'm working on a big project at Wesleyan College. I'm still figuring out how I can get in touch with local farms. Wesleyan provides housing and a meal plan so I'm actually on a college meal plan right now, which is bizarre. I feel disconnected from my farmers and this community. It's extra difficult to know what's going on with local farms because I'm not buying food right now.



Cups from *The Community Table* (2015)

I noticed that you've travelled quite a bit for your work. Do you feel like your experiences in each of these communities had lasting influences on the way you interact with communities where you work or your own community?

Yes, my Denmark residency did in particular. My father's side is Danish and growing up I knew absolutely nothing about my ancestry or anything related to the food of Denmark, the food that my ancestors ate. I found that confusing, especially as I got older and realized that in the amazing world in which we live, with all of these different cultures, I didn't know anything about where I came from.

I spent some time making objects at the beginning, but mostly I tried to meet people that were Danish and ask them to teach me to make traditional meals. So I got invited to the homes of lots of people to learn to make these traditional foods. The most significant was a woman named Bodil (pronounced Boh-Dee). She invited me to the Danish countryside to stay at her house and make rugbrød, which is Danish rye bread that takes two days to make. She spent time with me and served me a dinner, breakfast and lunch. It was the most incredible thing. At the end of it, I made all these food-specific dishes for meals I was taught, and then I invited the Danes, who taught me, to meet with an international community of artists to share a meal. I felt the need to do that to connect with my heritage and figure these things out.

For the residency I did in Red Lodge Clay Center in Montana, the idea for the residency was to bring in someone with an interest in community. So I made a set of dishes that traveled to twelve or thirteen meals in the community in seven days. It was a super intense process of getting to know the community and orchestrating these events. I reached out to the community to ask people what interested them and I told them I'd help them make it happen. The ideas were theirs.

I brought dishes to support their ideas. One woman, Martha, planned a meal to get all the restauranteurs in town together because they always prepared food for people, but never sat down at their tables and never sat down together. It was an incredible collaborative project.

With a project in which I've given a lot of myself to a community that isn't actually mine, it feels like mine at the end. I felt connected with them and finishing left me feeling confused. It's painful; it hurts when I leave after investing that much. I usually feel sad for a little while afterwards, like I left home; I created home and then I left it. It makes me think, "Do I need to find a permanent place?" Is the best way for someone to make work like I do to find a home and community long-term? Or can I do the most with my work by traveling, being in different communities, and offering what I have, to give a framework or some skills to continue to engage with each other. And I honestly don't have an answer.

When artists finish their MFA degrees, they often say to themselves, "Okay, success means I've gotten a tenure-track job." I honestly didn't know if that was right for me. I applied for jobs last year. I ultimately said no because I felt "that's going to take so much from me, I'm not going to be able to give in any other way." And I wasn't sure if I wanted to commit to only "giving" in this academic way. Now I'm at a college in this role that allows me to be an artist in residence and contribute to this community while working directly with classes. I'm working with professor Pat Pritchard's "understanding learning" course, collaborating on a semester-long public conversation project. I'm still in the classroom, but not in the traditional role as the teacher. It's been fulfilling and perfect for me. It's my dream job that didn't actually exist; I needed to make my own job.



The Growing Community Table (2016)
at Denison Art Space in Newark, Ohio

You define yourself as an “experience maker with vessel in hand.” How does the vessel act as a cultural transmitter and artifact? How do you think the dishes play a role in carrying narratives and influencing people in a political or social way?

It's the vessel and food together working as a transmitter. It's a given that we're going to eat — but I don't believe it's a given that we're going to eat healthily. By putting art objects in peoples' hands and asking them to eat from that, it really does change the way they think about the food and think about the person they are or are not eating with.

I realized people weren't using my dishes. They put them on their mantles. I view the vessel I created as much more than art object. I think of it as a transmitter because it's working in a way that traditional art doesn't. You're not just looking at the object, you're touching it, you're cutting food on it, or you're drinking from it. It can be a hindrance to people because some are afraid of the value placed on the object. They're scared they're going to break it, so it ends up on the mantle. I'm trying to fight that a little bit, but it's so engrained. We live in a throwaway culture of eating "on the go." We don't care what our food comes in because it's trash. I'm interested in the way eating off these handmade dishes can change the relationship with food and other people.

It's a very unpretentious way of challenging the idea that utility and art are mutually exclusive. I think the damage done to the objects from use adds a value to them. They carry these experiences in a way.

I'm in a relationship with another ceramic artist, Forrest Gard, and we have a pretty significant collection of handmade pottery, which is all we use to eat. So when I want a certain cup, I don't ask for a certain color or shape, I ask for a *person*. So I might say "I want the Lindsay Scypta." I'll say, "Forrest, can I get some orange juice in a Lindsay?" or "Can you get me some tea in the Hiroe?" We're very connected. Even if we don't know the person who made it, that dish has a name and it's the name of the artist.

I feel my role is to advocate for ceramics. Ceramics are not my primary source of income and I have no intention of making them so. I want to work directly with communities. I really hope after people participate, or just view my work, they are interested in handmade pottery and they want to own some.

The impulse to put objects on a pedestal (literally) can be counterintuitive to a more organic sense of appreciating art.

I would say the most significant event in this vein happened at the Red Lodge residency. One of the meals, *Lunch in the Sun*, was a free and reduced lunch for kids. During the event all the adults hovered over the children and would not let them touch the plates. There was an adult paired with every child and I just kept saying, “It’s okay, they can hold them” and that “if it breaks, that’s okay too.” The adults wouldn’t listen. They wanted the children to prize the dishes as art objects. But it’s really about the experience. So I had to hover over one child and tell him to walk the plate to the dish bin so I can get a picture of *one* kid holding a plate. The adults were completely out of control and prevented the children from having the experience.

I notice you say that a lot of the processes in your artwork are less about “art-making” and are instead things extraneous to that. But I don’t really see it that way. It seems to me that the experience is the primary art object. It’s tantamount to performance art or a happening. The integrity of the art comes from having people commune and appreciate their community.

Very much so. My art is experience-based. You need to experience it or hear the story through me to really “get it.” But there were a lot of issues for me in graduate school because of that. Being in the position of making art objects *and* experiences didn’t really work in an academic place.

They want you to pick. And so for three years, I was repeatedly asked “what’s more important, the object or the experience?” And I just kept saying, “Why would I choose?” If I want to make objects to suit the project, make it stronger and support what I’m doing, why wouldn’t I?

It’s such an unintuitive way of thinking about something so intuitive: eating with your friends. That experience can be elevated if people make an effort to appreciate it.

During my undergrad education, boundaries were applied to art. I never dreamed that what I do today would be identified as art. There’s a lot of push towards figuring out what you “should do” as an artist, but maybe you can decide, “I don’t want to define this.” My whole life is an art project. Does it really need to fall into this category of “just art,” or am I also a community organizer or am I an activist? I really think I’m all of them.

I was wondering a bit about the conceptuality of the objects you create. Is there much symbolism in their physicality?

A good reference point might be the photographs from my *Partake Columbus* (2015) project. Almost all the dishes I’ve made in the past three years have this sort of pattern or imagery. The platters have images of a big map of Columbus. I’ve taken that map and created a pattern – I interlock the highways into each other and make a reoccurring pattern that gets smaller. So it’s large on the plates, smaller on the bowls, and even smaller on the cups. Location is a really important part. Lately I’ve developed an interest in maps and how we navigate our spaces.



Plates from *Making a Meal* (2014)



Making A Meal at Hopkins Hall Gallery, Columbus, Ohio



Partake Columbus (2015) in Columbus, Ohio

I'm also interested in how you can lose yourself in a pattern. When you look at one of my plates, you're not going to see Columbus or Macon or Wesleyan College. But if you look really close you can figure it out. In that way I can embed that meaning into the physical object.

I noticed some similar ideas in *Weaving Dialogues*.

That was a collaborative project with my friend Lauren. For that one we used basket patterns wrapped around the cups. We wanted to draw from both the rich histories of basketry and ceramics and put them together, also thinking of weaving conversations together.

Can you speak about the different forms you use in your ceramics? In particular I'm curious about some cups I saw in which their cylindrical shapes are interrupted towards the bases by bulbous bottoms.

After I became sick I left home and got my Master's at the University of Florida. I was able to work with Linda Arbuckle, who is a mentor to me. She really pushed me to figure out what I wanted to make work about. At that point I was wanting to make good pots. That's all I knew. But I started to think deeper about my work. I was really interested in what happened to my body in relation to food. It was significant in food and community becoming subject matter. Those cups came from that – an interest in how the body moves. There is a place on the object where your hand will fit. You know immediately where. It's important it's obvious they're not mass-produced. Form and surface are ways I can push to differentiate from a cup you might pick up at Publix for five dollars.



Gallery view of *Partake Columbus*

Can you speak about your interest in ethnobotany, the relationship between humans and plants?

While I was taking greenhouse classes, I researched plants yet I still felt they seemed separate from me as a human. I was fascinated when I found a field about the connection between the two. I read Gary Paul Nabham's work. He's this fantastic scientist who writes about ethnobotany. I started growing my own food for the first time. I started using food I grew on dishes I designed, and I started serving it to people. I hosted a salad party and I thought, "How can I serve this?"

So I made dishes specifically to hold the lettuce I grew. I also built a planter and featured growing lettuce as a centerpiece on the table. I want to deepen the connection between humans and agriculture. We need to know where our food comes from.



Partake Columbus

What can you tell me about your relationship with teaching?

Between undergrad and graduate school I taught high school for a few years. I do believe that people are called to do certain jobs sometimes. For me that's working with people. I always thought that it was going to be happening in a classroom. When I started making this kind of community-focused work, something changed.

The first project that changed my mind was Dish Set Challenge 3 (2014). I had the opportunity to be in an exhibition with a bunch of other grad students and I didn't want to send objects. So I reached out to the gallery and asked if there would be five community members who would be interested in participating in this "dish set challenge."

I had already spent thirty days prior to this with a dish set I made for myself, using it for every meal I ate, and then recording it on a blog. I thought I could do the same thing with other people. The gallery was very receptive. They put out a call for people and let me serve a meal in the gallery. So I served a meal with food from twenty-seven local farms who donated food. I prepared on-site what I could with the ingredients I was given. And these five individuals committed to twenty-eight days of exhibition with us. They would eat one meal a day using this dish set that I made them, and then blog about it.

One of the people, Aurelio, wrote a post about his daily life: he was always working really hard, he was single, and he didn't have food in his fridge. Every meal that he ate, he ate out, and that's what worked for him. The reason he wanted to do the project was that he wanted to sit down and he wanted to share meals with people. Throughout the project, he started doing meatless Mondays, he started preparing his own food, he posted a picture on the blog of his refrigerator with food in it. His final reflection was so powerful, I cried when I read it. After the process, he said he realized it was important to sit down and eat with other people regularly, and that he started sharing meals with the people who are most important to him. I just thought, "Wow, he just taught me something about my own work." How could I have forgotten when I did it? I had done a whole thirty days on my own.

In the end Aurelio was more apt to share a meal with someone, to prepare it and to sit down and make that meal meaningful *because* of the dishes. From there on out most of my work was about getting more than one person to sit down to eat and about human to human changes through the use of the dishes. They're a catalyst. I realized how powerful art is. And I didn't *know* until then.

Leading up to that final reflection from Aurelio, I thought I had to be a teacher to feel fulfilled. And in that moment I realized I can be a lot of things. Maybe there's not just one career path that works. I learned how to use creativity to impact and empower people in a way that I previously thought was only possible through teaching.

I have one final two-part question: what's your favorite meal, and what's your favorite meal to prepare?

My favorite meal is lobster! But I feel bad saying that because I really don't eat a lot of meat. I mean, I can tell you that, but I also want it to be known that I feel bad that's my favorite meal [Laughs].

My favorite dish to make is a beet risotto. I don't know why [Laughs]. It's one of the first recipes I made; I made it with my mom. It was in an issue of *Food & Wine Magazine* a long time ago. The original recipe is still in my recipe book right now. I probably was about twenty-five when I first made it, probably right around the time I became sick. I like the way it takes so long to make a risotto. You really have to be invested in it. It's so much work and it's just such a simple dish. It's not much, but I like making it a lot. Also, *Strawberries*. I've loved fruit ever since I was a child. And watermelon too. But maybe you can just keep it short and say, "Lobster, and she feels bad."



Dear Grandma (2014) in Skælskør, Denmark