



Eating at the Table of Knowledge

Posted in [News & Views](#), [Out & About](#) on Thu, 11/10/2011 - 7:00am by Leigh Ahmad -



Marrnita's Table uses the dinner table as a means for bringing people together and solving some of the community's toughest issues and food is definitely the common denominator for all Marrnita's Table events. Founded five years ago by husband and wife team Marrnita Schroedl and Carl Goldstein, Marrnita's Table's (MT) mission is to bridge cultural, generational, and socio-economic differences by the use of "intentional social interaction".

The way it works: a community or an organization brings to MT a topic of concern such as race, isolation of refugees, or high school graduation rates and then staff and volunteers "set up table". MT creates an intimate dinner setting at either Marrnita and Carl's home, or one of the Table's many volunteers will host the dinner and conversation.

Careful planning goes into crafting the menu as well as the guest list of those invited to sit at the table. The food and the table guests alike are designed to be eclectic, fun, thought-provoking and representative of the community-at-large, for which we are all members. That being said, attendance at a Marrnita's Table event will be sure to provide guests with a very diverse and colorful experience intended to cross barriers and spark meaningful dialogue. Conversations are all inclusive and are not just for policy-makers and social workers.

Fervent MT follower and City of St. Cloud mayor, Dave Kleis, enthusiastically described his experience he had while hosting an event:

"We decided to host a table at my house in an effort to begin a conversation with some of St. Cloud's immigrant and refugee community. Marnita interrupted the reception in an effort to introduce me and move the guests to the table for dinner. The young Somali woman with whom I was engaged in conversation with, turned to me and said, 'If I had known you were the mayor, I would never have spoken to you!'"

Upon entering the reception area of MT's annual fundraiser themed *Food / Shelter / Clothing*, I was immediately impressed by the sincerity of the volunteers present. The volunteers were very much representative of our community, varying in age, race and class and each were eager to tell their story about how MT has positively influenced their lives. The saying, "children should be seen, not heard" is not a MT tenant as evidenced by the larger number of youth volunteers and participants in attendance. Due to the fast-paced and fast-food lifestyles of Americans these days, many children don't have an opportunity to experience dinner table conversation. Not so with MT, where youth are strongly encouraged to attend *and* participate.

Equally impressive was the role in which food was cast. Having attended a number of similar events, I expect food to take a much smaller part of the party as the host is looking to raise funds necessary to continue doing their good work and must keep food cost at a minimum. This is clearly one way in which MT veers off the path and stands out from the rest.

The food was strategically staged throughout two reception areas in an effort to create a stroll down the "Haute Street Foods" street fair. Chefs from [Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts](#) served up a deliciously warm and savory bowl of Spanish Paella; a slow cook of chicken, calamari and shrimp embedded with Spanish sofrito, peas and saffron. French for "pan", "paella" means a dish comprised of rice, vegetables and seasonal meats cooked for a long time in a large, shallow pan. The effect of standing around the impressive paella while knocking elbows with fellows attendees was indeed a great way to get introductions flowing.



Potter's Pasties

Further down the lane, [Potter's Pasties and Pies](#) offered five different single-serving stuffed pastry pies including: The Traditional, Chicken Pastry, Thai Veg, The Pig, and Sausage Roll.

Next were the Chef/ Owners of [Gastrotruck](#), who greeted me warmly and boasted the fact that everything served was hand selected and crafted. They also are quick to speak of their philosophy of "zero waste," which is incorporated into their business model. I sampled the vegan black bean burger topped with pickled red onions and a distinctive apple jalapeno relish. The hand-crafted relishes and chutneys were laid out in a self-serve fashion, which made for a fun and engaging

communal experience.



She Royal Lamb Sambusa and Curry

Lamb and spinach placed in a airy and buttery sambusa handmade by chef/owner Hana Benti of [She Royal](#) was indeed a treat for the taste buds. Featuring African and Mediterranean cuisine, She Royal offered up an alternate point of view to the Table. Hana's hospitality and eagerness to showcase her food to a new group of potential customers was clearly an example of the reciprocity Marnita's Table strives for with their "intentional social interaction" mission.

Marnita in her sweet, but firm way, steered the crowd into "engaging

conversation with someone that doesn't look like you". Armed with conversation starter place cards which contained questions centered around the night's theme of *Food | Shelter | Clothing*, I headed toward a teen-aged girl and introduced myself; she agreed to chat. This vibrant and intelligent girl's name was Gabrielle Mathias and she was in attendance with her mother and baby nephew. Gabrielle was invited to the Table by her mom who is a manager of youth programs for [A-List](#), a non-profit that runs a snack and apparel shop staffed by youth. Gabrielle volunteers for the after-school programs, assisting teenagers with their ACT preparation.



My designated question or conversation starter read, "What is your first food memory?". Gabrielle responded, "ham cooking in the oven". I asked if she had tried any of the food tonight and she shyly responded that she had tried some things, but was not sure exactly what she ate. This was definitely a new food experience for her. When questioned as to what her purpose was, she said she wasn't sure, but she was there to learn. She then engaged me with information about all of the great work A-List was doing and about how it helps teenagers to find purpose and gain real work experience.

The fact that we were invited to sit at the Table, try new foods and to contribute to the collective dialogue was exactly what is intended through Marnita's Table. MT starts the conversation and those in attendance are responsible for moving the conversation to action. I walked away vowing to take action on the issue of connecting those with low incomes with opportunities to access, prepare and eat good food.



Leigh Ann Ahmad was dragged kicking and screaming to the Cities by her husband; having been born and bred in Cleveland, Ohio, she just could not fathom how colder could be better. Now, five years and two kids later, she cannot imagine a better place to play and thrive. She's a reformed carb-aholic, wannabe writer, social justice advocate, book- club geek, veggie grower and local foods connoisseur. Her last article for SGT was: [Take action: your food dollars build just communities.](#)

Tags: [she royal](#), [potters pasties and pies](#), [multicultural conversations](#), [Marnita's table](#), [Marnita Schroedl](#), [leigh ahmad](#), [Le Cordon Bleu](#), [intentional planning](#), [gastrotruck](#), [Gabrielle Mathias](#), [Dave Kleis](#), [community meetings](#), [community action](#), [Carl Goldstein](#)



Comments

Anonymous says:

Wed, 11/16/2011 - 11:01pm

I was there and this event isn't the one that is created sometimes weekly at their home! If you really want to experience the table that is the way to go - with a specific topic. I heard next year the end-of-the-year event will have the theme Science, Technology and ART. I can hardly wait, imagine having good food AND all that.

I am currently reading Marnita's self-published book (what a woman) and it preps you for Thanksgiving...hurry and get this as it includes cards with questions to empower wonderful, intentional conversation for your family and friends.

YES! I'm a supporter.

Marnita says:

Mon, 11/21/2011 - 6:36am

Thank you for such a wonderful story on the Table. We are so glad that it touched you and ISI worked it's magic to inspire you Leigh to do more with individuals in poverty have access to amazing food.

All of us are really proud of what we created with the Table. It's exciting to hear from people that have only experienced it once and only a "taste" of the Table that you could feel our effectiveness and responded to it.

Our next book Resolute! A celebration for New Year's comes out in December.

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