

MORE THAN A MEAL

Interactive artworks ask visitors to rethink what they eat, where it comes from and who pays the price

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What if your next meal could tell the story of climate change, colonialism, migration, technology and survival? At Calorie, food steps off the plate and becomes the protagonist in a powerful exploration of the systems that shape our lives.

Far from a conventional art exhibition, this immersive showcase challenges everything visitors think they know. With six overarching themes that focus on the food we grow, buy, eat, cook, waste and digest, the exhibits here are connected to these themes and take visitors on a thought-provoking journey.

From wrestling like a farmer battling climate change to listening to the sounds of a giant human gut, every installation serves up uncomfortable truths, and leaves plenty of food for thought.

Calorie is all about the relationship between food, agriculture, ecology, history, technology, culture and climate change.

Much like one of the opening installations, Farmer is a Wrestler by Delhi-based artists Thukral and Tagra, which draws inspiration from the akhada tradition of Kushti wrestling.

Visitors are invited to perform seven wrestling-inspired movements on a mat, with each movement symbolising a challenge faced by farmers, from climate change and global warming to landlessness and economic insecurity.

By combining physical engagement with storytelling, the work transforms the visitor into an active participant, encouraging empathy for agricultural communities and highlighting the growing pressures on farming livelihoods.

Art collaborations

Another major work, Long-Hanging Fruit by Indonesian artist Elia Nurvita, traces the history of palm oil cultivation in Indonesia. While most of us associate palm oil with chips, biscuits, and instant noodles, this exhibit starts with Dutch colonial expansion.

The exhibit explains how palm plantations

transformed forests into monocultures and displaced indigenous communities that had traditionally depended on hunting and gathering. A collaborative mural created with community participants using palm oil reinforces the exhibit's themes of collective memory and ecological transformation.

Ragi.net is another installation by artist Surekha, who examines the city's changing landscape through a food that has a quintessential association with the city.

Through infographics and visual documentation, visitors see the city's dramatic transformation between 1973 and 2023, revealing rapid urbanisation and shrinking natural spaces.

Her installation incorporates living and dried ragi plants growing from recycled monitors, linking traditional agriculture with modern technology, and reminding viewers of the crops that once dominated the region are fast disappearing as we make space for real estate.

Asking the right questions

Taking this further, Dayananda Nagaraju contributes deeply personal works reflecting the changing relationship between farmers and their tools. One installation features sickles, beginning with one handmade by his father at his birth and ending with mass-produced versions, illustrating how industrialisation has eroded craftsmanship and emotional attachment to everyday farming implements.

Another work, Golden Seed, recalls how

crop failure forced the artist's mother to sell her mangalsutra, turning family gold into food and survival.

Several exhibits examine alternative food systems. A.T.'s insect collection explores communities in Northeast India that traditionally consume insects. Carefully displayed specimens demonstrate their ecological significance while challenging the stigma surrounding entomophagy.

Nearby, Italian artist Giulia Cenci's Cavallette uses embroidered crickets to explore the contradictory symbolism of insects as both nourishment and destructive locust swarms, illustrating humanity's complex relationship with nature.

Food for thought

Through the exhibits the common thread is food history and migration that emerge as recurring themes. Gulistan, by Gopal Trivedi, questions ideas of "local" food by showing that many ingredients considered central to Indian cuisine, including tomatoes, chillies, muskmelons, and coffee, arrived through trade, migration, and colonial exchange.

Designed to resemble a Mughal Charbagh, the installation encourages visitors to think about belonging, cultural adaptation and the movement of crops across continents.

One of the exhibition's most memorable installations resembles a giant human intestine. By recording and amplifying natural digestive sounds, the artists seek to remove the embarrassment associated

with gut noises while introducing visitors to the gut-brain connection.

The installation highlights how digestion influences both physical and emotional wellbeing and encourages people to appreciate the body's natural processes.

Parag Tandel's installation How to Cook Bombay Duck in Various Ways explores the cultural identity of Mumbai's Koli fishing community. Using the preservation of Bombay Duck fish as a metaphor for preserving community traditions, the work reflects on the threats posed by urban development and the gradual disappearance of traditional fishing livelihoods.

Looking ahead

The exhibition also honours the work of renowned Indian food historian K.T. Achaya through books, research materials and archival objects. A public reading room encourages visitors to explore food history in greater depth.

The section titled Alternative Food Futures investigates how technology increasingly shapes eating habits. Interactive works demonstrate the attention economy by interrupting videos whenever viewers stop looking at their meals, while other installations compare smartphone notifications with Pavlovian conditioning, questioning whether technology has fundamentally altered our relationship with food and concentration.

At the end there is an immersive installation exploring biodiversity, forest regeneration and ecological memory. Developed through collaboration between artists and ecologists, the work demonstrates how scientific research and artistic interpretation can complement one another to make complex environmental ideas more accessible.

Overall, the exhibition presents food as an entry point into broader conversations about sustainability, climate resilience, colonial history, technology, biodiversity, and social equity, encouraging visitors to reconsider the systems that shape what and how they eat.