Convivial Quarantines: Cultivating Co-presence at a Distance

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Abstract
Sociology’s focus on sociality and co-presence has long oriented studies of commensality—the social dimension of eating together. This literature commonly prioritizes face-to-face interactions and takes physical proximity for granted. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 largely halted in-person gatherings and altered everyday foodways. Consequently, many people turned to digital commensality, cooking and eating together through video-call technology such as Zoom and FaceTime. We explore the implications of these new foodways and ask: has digital commensality helped cultivate co-presence amidst pandemic-induced physical separation? If so, how? To address these questions, we analyze two forms of qualitative data collected by the first author: interviews with individuals who cooked and ate together at a distance since March 2020 and digital ethnography during different groups’ online food events (e.g., happy hours, dinners, holiday gatherings, and birthday celebrations). Digital commensality helps foster a sense of co-presence and social connectedness at a distance. Specifically, participants use three temporally oriented strategies to create or maintain co-presence: they draw on pre-pandemic pasts and reinvent culinary traditions to meet new circumstances; they creatively adapt novel digital foodways through online dining; and they actively imagine post-pandemic futures where physically proximate commensality is again possible.

Keywords Co-presence · Commensality · COVID-19 · Digital ethnography · Temporality

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Introduction

Sociologists have long stressed the profound significance of co-presence to everyday social interactions (Goffman 1963). A recent branch of this scholarship focuses on commensality—the social dimension of eating together—and demonstrates how experiencing communal foodways helps foster feelings of belonging and togetherness (Fischler 2011; Jönsson et al. 2021; Kerner et al. 2015; Warde 2016). Literatures on commensality and sociality have emphasized the significance of physical (face-to-face) proximity to co-presence—such as cooking together in a kitchen and dining with others around a table—and the collective understandings that such conviviality proffers for social relationships (Julier 2013; Sobal and Nelson 2003; Symons 2010). The spread of the SARS-Cov-2 virus and the ongoing and profoundly “unsettled” nature of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shepherd et al. 2020) have affected commensality in particular and co-present sociality more generally. Given the importance of proximity to feelings of social connection, the pandemic’s influence on physical separation (stemming from its air-borne virulence alongside quarantine protocols and social distancing precautions) and foodways (such as the closure of restaurants and the limiting of social gatherings) presents several points for inquiry: Can people maintain or create co-presence at a distance? How have everyday social meanings of food and communal practices been adjusted to new pandemic circumstances? What might be the social repercussions of these shifts?

In response to the massive international shutdowns of 2020, many people turned to socializing with family and friends online and adjusted their foodways to be together while geographically distant, aided by video-call technologies such as Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Skype (Ceccaldi et al. 2020). This has led to numerous instances—spurred on by social media—of “quarantine cooking,” “Zoom happy hours,” and “distanced dining.” Following several recent studies on co-presence (Campos-Castillo 2012; Goffman 2019; Grabher et al. 2018; Zhao and Elesh 2008), these pandemic foodways denote a new “digital commensality” (Spence et al. 2019) where digital platforms and culinary/gastronomic practices are engaged collaboratively and reciprocally influence one another. We began researching adjustments in commensal foodways as online cooking and eating practices developed during the early months of the pandemic. We focused on new connections and collaborations over video calls on virtual platforms, observing a range of digital commensality events and conducting 25 interviews with US residents who have practiced online foodways since March 2020. We asked if and how new forms of digital commensality helped cultivate co-presence and social connectedness amidst pandemic-induced physical separation and attendant anxieties.

Our findings show that digital commensality frequently led to the belief in togetherness, though not as profoundly as do accounts of commensality that results from physical proximity. Namely, we uncover three temporally oriented strategies used to nurture co-presence when cooking or eating together at a distance. First, participants drew on pre-pandemic foodways and adjusted their special and everyday eating habits to the new circumstances, referring explicitly to memories of past dishes and meals at specific in-person gatherings. Second, participants creatively experimented with digital platforms for new pandemic-specific foodways, such as virtual cooking classes and eating online with family and friends they would not usually meet, which helped reorient their
culinary and gastronomic rhythms in light of ongoing pandemic realities. Finally, participants used ‘future talk’ to imagine hypothetical post-pandemic foodways and eventual in-person gatherings, especially when synchronization was difficult to achieve (such as with poor Wi-Fi connections). Building on recent scholarship on co-presence and on commensality, we show how these temporally oriented practices fostered conviviality among individuals eating together at a distance during this social crisis. Even as we can foresee the post-pandemic’s “new normal,” exploring these strategies for negotiating co-presence offers insights into the versatility of sociality to evolve situationally and contextually and demonstrates how digital technologies mediate the practical, as well as symbolic, dimensions of sensemaking around contemporary foodways.

We begin by outlining existing scholarship on co-presence and commensality and consider the move away from seeing physical proximity as essential to understandings of togetherness. We then discuss strategies of researching during a pandemic, reflecting on synchronizing with participants and the affordances of digital ethnography to allow the researcher to observe multiple places simultaneously. Next, we present and analyze field notes and interviews that exemplify the three temporal strategies used to cultivate co-presence at a distance, and finally conclude with suggestions for further research.

**Corporeal Telecopresence in Digital Commensality**

Co-presence has long been central to academic inquiry into sociality. Though a seemingly quotidian practice, it is fundamental to social connectedness and the maintenance of community (Chayko 2014; Collins 2004; Small 2017). Sociological studies of social interaction have largely considered co-presence within instances of spatial closeness (Goffman 1963). In these “face-to-face” interactions, individuals experience rich sensory and emotional regimes that foster the emergence and sustenance of feelings of togetherness.1 Zhao (2003, 447) considers this corporeal co-presence: “a form of human colocation in which both individuals are present in-person at their sites as well as in each other’s physical proximity.” Sociological studies of everyday foodways have also foregrounded co-presence, focusing on corporeal exchanges in kitchens, restaurants, and other dining spaces (Demetry 2013; Fine 1996; Finkelstein 1989). Physical closeness is central to this scholarship, showing how everyday eating across a communal table sustains relationships while also setting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Douglas 1984; Julier 2013; Kerner et al. 2015).

It follows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic consequences for corporeal co-presence, given the nature of contagion, quarantine regulations, and social distancing measures aimed at preventing physical interaction (Collins 2020). Researchers have begun to analyze the social impacts of major shifts in Americans’

1 The centrality of space and proximity are particularly visible in Goffman’s (1963, 17) descriptions of how co-presence emerges: “The full conditions of copresence, however, are found in less variable circumstances: persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived. In our walled-in Western society, these conditions are ordinarily expected to obtain throughout the space contained in a room, and to obtain for any and all persons present in the room” (original emphasis).
pandemic-related day-to-day experiences of space (Mehta 2020), time (Chan 2020),
and mobility (Adey et al. 2021). Communal foodways, both public and private,
similarly changed significantly due to limits on gatherings, closed restaurants, and
restricted visits (Clüver 2021; Oleschuk et al. 2021). These reports suggest that Amer-
icans have experienced a loss of co-presence amid heightened stress and uncertainty.

Recent theoretical work on co-presence offers a way forward, suggesting that physical
proximity is not a necessary condition for co-presence (Grabher et al. 2018; Zhao and
Elesh 2008). Consider Campos-Castillo and Hitlin’s (2013, 169) definition of co-pres-
ence: “the perception of mutual entrainment between actors, where entrainment is the
mutual synchronization of three components: attention, emotion, and behavior” (original
emphasis). An individual could have more “perceived proximity” with someone living
across the world than with their neighbor, for instance (O’Leary et al. 2014). This definition
moves away from a focus on physical colocation and toward other non-corporeal forms of interaction by emphasizing situational affiliation. We examine commensal
moments of corporeal telecopresence, which Zhao (2003, 447) defines as “a form of
human colocation in which both individuals are present in-person at their local sites, but
they are located in each other’s electronic proximity rather than physical proximity.”

This approach allows scholars to grapple with the prevalence of new technologies
that permit and mediate electronic, online, digital, and virtual interactions. Corporeally
telepresent moments are part of a “synthetic situation,” where, for instance, global
business practices, transnational family relations, and diasporic cultural engagements
occur synchronously and instantaneously across vast physical distances (Ito 2005;
Knorr-Cetina 2009; Madianou 2016). Drawing on work by Evitar Zerubavel, Chayko
(2019) argues that communities within digital spaces maintain togetherness through
“temporal symmetry.” She writes: “feeling that we are ‘in sync’ with others, even (or
especially) when we are apart from them physically, provides human beings with much
needed and desired feelings of familiarity and belonging. It lets us know, in a deep,
comforting way… that we are not psychologically and socially alone in the world” (66).

While most scholarship on commensality has been grounded in physically proximate
foodways, recent work—particularly in psychology2—has begun to incorporate corporeal
telecopresence into its study design and theory, such as in research on migrants and indi-
viduals in long-distance romantic relationships (Marino 2019; Neustaedter and Greenberg
2012). This new “digital commensality” includes eating while watching someone else

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2 Though research on digital commensality is limited, existing concepts serve as useful scaffolding. For
instance, there is a general incompatibility in online technology’s design to cooking and eating needs
given the “messy, performative and communicative needs while cooking in the kitchen” (Chai et al.
2017, 2438). Video calling, messaging, and social media platforms facilitate long-distance relationships,
yet are not optimal for the noises, messes, and ergonomic/spatial challenges characteristic of everyday
food practices. Online interactions while cooking or eating are also shaped by physical environments.
The placement of video streaming equipment and camera angle choices influence the dynamic of the
interaction and activities including, “sharing, exploring, participating, relating, socializing, involving,
and showing” (Paay et al. 2012, 1887). Furthermore, technological legibility and infrastructure alter the
experience of digital connectivity. Individuals navigate emerging complications through “play” and per-
form a sense of togetherness through these interactions (Barden et al. 2012). Communal online foodways
are often seen as entertainment for families, friends, and acquaintances separated by large distances, and
thus serve the dual function of facilitating recreation while also allowing for experimentations in medi-
ated food experiences and exchanges (Grevet et al. 2012; Wei et al. 2011).
eat virtually, communal online cooking classes, and, particularly salient to our project, eating while on a video call (parties tuning in to a collective conference call to cook or eat together while in separate physical locations) (Spence et al. 2019). These practices expanded during the pandemic as individuals performed and made sense of social distancing (Cossu 2022). While some find the differences between in-person and digital commensality too great be worthwhile, others appreciate connections with friends, coworkers, and family (Aquije Zegarra 2020; Ceccaldi et al. 2020). Given the ever-changing contexts of the pandemic and new research on online foodways, we ask: How has digital commensality fostered co-presence amidst pandemic-induced physical separation?

For our participants, eating together while apart provided important elements to synchronize and foster togetherness and community amidst stressful and isolating circumstances. Though people experienced the pandemic in distinct and personal ways, we identified several common temporal strategies used in practicing digital commensality. Participants imagined the pandemic as a collective and sequenced event with a pre-pandemic past, ongoing pandemic realities, and post-pandemic futures. They synchronized throughout social distancing and connected by reinventing food-related traditions, adjusting their trajectories, and visualizing expectations in response to the disrupted rhythms of social interaction.

**Methods for a Pandemic: Synchronizing Together**

Interviewing and ethnography—which have long taken embodied interaction and physical co-presence as a standard—are at a crossroads (Fine and Abramson 2020). Given the incessant health risks of COVID-19, researchers must consider the ethics of in-person projects and fashion creative solutions. We used online interviewing and digital ethnography, which have helped researchers overcome the constraints of geographical separation for the last decade (Hallett and Barber 2013), and more recently have generated reflection on mutual co-presence between researcher and participants during the pandemic (Averett 2021; Howlett 2021). Digital investigation similarly provides opportunities for producing knowledge about alternatives to face-to-face gatherings, allowing the researcher to observe multiple places concurrently and establish rapport within private spaces (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Murthy 2008; Pink et al. 2016; Underberg and Zorn 2014). Without the necessity for physical proximity to conduct a study, the researcher can focus on rapport through temporal synchronization, or entrainment, rather than on entrée into a spatially defined location. The ethnographic field becomes a *practice* rather than a *place*, allowing the study’s parameters to emerge organically rather than be pre-defined.3 Beaulieu (2010, 457) notes, “‘establishing co-presence’ is a distinct epistemic strategy that leads the ethnographer to ask, ‘How can I establish co-presence?’ rather than ‘Where do I go?’”

We draw on digital ethnography during 12 digital commensality events and 25 online semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author since July 2020. He recruited participants through advertisements on various social media platforms and

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3 This approach also allows the researcher to focus on practices themselves, characterized by Reckwitz (2002) as interconnected types of behavior, routines, know-how, and emotional states.
subsequent network sampling and conducted interviews on Zoom, FaceTime, and GoogleMeet or over the phone, and informants received a $25 Visa gift card for their participation. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes, in which participants were asked about their cooking and eating habits before the pandemic, the details of their online pandemic foodways, and their reflections on related changes in food-work and sociality. Conversations began with general questions, such as: “What are some of the discussion topics that arise while eating online together?” and “Could you describe your favorite online eating event you have engaged in since the pandemic began?” Subsequently, the open-ended questions followed the individual trajectories of the interviewee’s experience. These conversations were designed to build rapport, such as sharing fond memories of visiting the Minnesota State Fair in light of it being canceled in 2020, empathizing over Zoom fatigue from work meetings, or discussing plans to visit and share a meal in-person when safe.

After the interview, participants were asked if they would allow the first author to sit in on an upcoming digital commensality event they were hosting. As a result, he participated in a dozen events: birthday parties, holiday gatherings, cocktail hours, dinners, cooking classes, brunches, and cook-alongs. These events lasted between 20 minutes and four hours, depending on the activity, though gatherings were typically on the shorter end of this spectrum. We coded transcribed interviews and field notes using Atlas.Ti, then organized the codes into second-order themes around different temporal dimensions of online commensality. Participants were adult US residents with access to online communication resources, including Wi-Fi, phones, tablets, and computers. Though digital devices and media literacy are steadily becoming ubiquitous, these resources indicate the privileged nature of the communities that can engage in online eating and dining. Further research that considers unequal access to digital foodways is warranted.

Co-presence and Commensality

Building on recent literature on digital commensality and co-presence and through the analysis of the data collected for this project, we show how participants used three temporal strategies to create and maintain togetherness at a distance. First, people reinvented4 culinary traditions and rituals that help constitute co-presence with those who they would otherwise cook or dine with in-person by eliciting pre-pandemic memories and processing new unsettled times collectively. Next, they worked to foster co-presence during periods of isolation and loneliness by creating new pandemic-specific foodways, such as learning to cook online and reconnecting with old friends through digital commensality. Finally, participants built solidarity amidst unpredictable pandemic developments by imagining eventual in-person dining experiences and reflecting on the future of digital commensality. Each of the subsequent sections begins with an ethnographic vignette before analyzing interview quotes and field notes.

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4 Here, we use the term ‘reinvention’ to denote rediscovery and adjustment of commensal practices, but also the shoring up of close ties, such that they can remain viable through external disruptions.
Reinventing Tradition

“Tim, you are muted.” “Wow, Anthony, you have gotten big!” “Hey grandpa, you need to turn your camera on.” “Tim, you have to hit the little microphone but-” “Alice, how is soccer going?” “Hey there, Jake!”

Then silence.

“Okay, I have muted everyone, but just for a second,” Ellen says, holding a glossy chocolate cake with a bright “23!” and “Happy Birthday Randy” up to the camera. The Zoom party’s twenty participants look on, and Ellen continues, “I’ve lit the candles. On the count of three, everyone unmute and sing Happy Birthday. Ready? One! Two! Three!”

“hAAppy birth-Day to. . . happp birthday TO Y- HAPPy birthdaay dear Ran-dyyyy…” The audio fades in and out as the chorus tries to sync up to finish the tune. “Happy Birthdayyy to You!” Individual voices gradually subside, and a wave of applause follows. Across video screens, those present smile or post Zoom “clapping” or “thumbs up.” ~Field notes 08/2020

The early months of the pandemic brought dramatic changes to how Americans procured, prepared, and consumed food. Participants used Zoom and other video calling technologies for everything from wedding celebrations to happy hours. Throughout emerging social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders, many, like Ellen and her family, adapted pre-pandemic culinary traditions and communal rituals by celebrating significant life events digitally. Bringing family together to sing “Happy Birthday” to Randy and watch Ellen cut the cake, for instance, unquestionably harkened to birthdays past. This section shows how co-present sociality through reinvented traditions fostered continuity and comfort amidst feelings of separation and fragmentation in both quotidian and eventful ways. Cooking and eating together over computer and tablet screens became forms of community, with video calls the portals from kitchen to kitchen and dining room to dining room.

Major holidays, especially early in the pandemic, were initially met with apprehension as many people canceled or avoided in-person gatherings for fear of health risks. However, ingenuity soon followed as their steadfast desires to celebrate together persisted through spring and fall holidays and into the New Year. One of the first pandemic holidays—also the most frequently referenced by participants—was Easter. As the following excerpts suggest, they were keen to keep alive the co-presence of particular customs, even if it meant foregoing exact reproductions:

My mom and I always make this carrot cake for Easter. That was especially difficult because it was the first holiday we couldn’t spend with my grandparents—they were as isolated as you could be at that point. My mom brought a third of the carrot cake to my grandparents, a third of it to my aunt and uncle,

5 All names are pseudonyms.
and then we had a third of it. I helped everyone download Zoom so we could all watch the recorded church service together. And then afterward, we all had the carrot cake together. My mom wanted to make sure we still felt connected, and that was her way of doing that. ~Kelly

My mom lives about a mile away and she has dementia and she’s diabetic, so she has a fulltime live-in aide who prepares her meals. In the beginning, we really distanced ourselves. The aide would put my mom on FaceTime when she was having a meal so we could all sit together and talk. Easter Sunday, my brother connected all of us on the FaceTime call. He got takeout, and I dropped two meals off for my mother and her aide. We were able to talk to my mom—who was a little confused—but she laughed, and it was like we were all together… We usually never get takeout out on a holiday, but we did. We were laughing about how things tasted different than what we usually cook. And we didn’t do dessert this time. I’m glad we did it because it meant a lot. We took pictures of the people on the Zoom… to remember what the Easter holiday was in 2020. ~Susan

Susan and Kelly each voiced appreciation for their reinvented meal, while accepting alterations such as ordering takeout instead of home cooking, not having dessert, or eating pieces of the same cake in three different abodes after simultaneously watching the same virtual church service. Participants attempted to make these events as convivial as possible; recounting that they held on to what they considered the essence of the holiday. In several instances, this consisted of voicing thankfulness for good health and appreciation of those who could attend.

Participants also joined digital commensality events during non-religious holidays, like Valentine’s Day, Pi Day, Halloween, and the Super Bowl in addition to significant non-holiday events, such as weddings, baby showers, dinner dates, and anniversary celebrations. The transition to pandemic anniversaries was easy for one interviewee, Paula, who already had a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend:

My boyfriend lives two hours away from me. For our anniversary every month, he would be like, “I’m not going to be able to come down like this weekend. So, why don’t we just have a little date and eat something on FaceTime.” At first, it was a joke because we weren’t able to see each other, but now we really can’t see each other. So, we kind of got used to it, I guess.

Reinvented traditions provided an excuse to visit with others and make good food; importantly, they also offered a space to remember and reminisce about pre-pandemic times. For example, while cooking lunch with her brother over WhatsApp, Nina recalled:

When we would get together and eat, I enjoyed that… We talked mostly about childhood because we grew up altogether—a lot of reminiscing about what we would do during the holiday, like, “remember when we made this dish, and it was completely chaos? Like we burned something.” A lot about childhood and past times.
Nostalgia and reflection grounded most of our interviewees in their recollections of shared pasts with close ties as they took solace in reliving memories brought on by the food, rituals, and conversations elicited by virtual cooking and eating.

While virtual holidays and traditions were often the most eventful and memorable pandemic foodways, many addressed pandemic-induced loneliness through more quotidian commensal gatherings. Such events often had fewer stakes than the aforementioned “big” traditions, providing a space to escape into “ambient” or “light-hearted” co-presence (Chayko 2014; Ito 2005). Take, for instance, the following observation at a Zoom happy hour:

Raul proposed a toast, so I raised my glass along with the others in their Zoom windows. Raul’s girlfriend, Tania—scrambling to find a drink before realizing she was without—grabbed Raul’s beer, and took a swig. We all laughed. Raul then asked what Tony was eating. “It’s a calzone… picked it up after work,” Tony replied. “That looks tasty! I am hungry,” Raul replied. Then Tania chimed in, “Ooh, let’s order a pizza. Anyone know of any spots around here?” ~Field notes 07/2020

Though a mundane conversation, ambient co-presence allowed participants to counter the tedium of quarantine and find empathy during isolation. The presence of alcohol also helped facilitate lighthearted and humorous engagements as it does in face-to-face environments. These events, especially happy hours, were frequently described as spontaneous and fit nicely into stay-at-home schedules, as the following conversations exemplify:

Ken and I FaceTime without notifying the other beforehand. It’s like, “Hey man, I just cracked a brew—come join.” I’m like, “Alright, I’m in…” It feels like old times… Whereas if two days before you’re like, alright, “Does 6:30 p.m. work for everyone?” And someone’s like, “Oh, could we do seven?” And then it becomes a process of planning and figuring out scheduling. ~Evan

We made margaritas. I would make mine, and they would make theirs, and then we’ll just drink them together on FaceTime. Once I got my little pitcher of margarita, I went outside, and my daughter was in the pool, and I was drinking margaritas and eating chips and salsa and just having girl talk and stuff. ~Carrie

With four of my friends, we all did a Zoom in our wedding dresses. We put our wedding dresses back on and made margaritas. We drank in our wedding dresses just to mix it up. ~Lauren

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6 Throughout the pandemic, Americans showed a sustained increase in the amount of “drinking days” they engaged in (Nordeck et al. 2022). Drinking alcohol indeed accompanied many of our participants’ commensal activities and motivated several Zoom exchanges and happy hours. Alcohol’s influences on the dynamics of online engagements were multiple. For some, virtually sharing a drink lowered inhibitions and stress, offered a novel topic of conversation, and mirrored prepandemic drinking traditions. For others, Zoom allowed them to make toasts to important life events, take bartending classes, or share new cocktail recipes with friends. By staying at home, participants did not have to commit to an entire evening out or assign a designated driver. While participants did look forward to the return of physically co-present drinking culture, alcohol presented new and reworked possibilities for online commensality.
Evan’s preference for spontaneity, Carrie’s pleasure in relaxation, and Lauren’s desire to “spice things up” demonstrate that telecopresence was seen as an escape, an easy synchronization grounded in shared rituals. As happy hours moved from bars to Zoom, participants found comfort in the more familiar elements of digital commensality.

Some eating traditions did not need much reinventing. Ella, a student studying in the United States with family in India, noted that she called her parents nearly every day before the pandemic. With the 12-hour time difference, she could have breakfast while her parents ate dinner. During quarantine, their consistent digital presence was more important to Ella:

It was nice to have human company for dinner, rather than sitting all by yourself. I wasn’t meeting any people at that time, pretty much staying home all the time. When I grew up, everybody sat at the table and always had dinner together. So, it was kind of like reliving those days, you know, in a different way.

For Ella, digital commensality with her parents harkened back to childhood comforts, providing a sense of security. In some cases, ambient co-presence meant leaving a video call on while cooking but not directly talking to the other person. This was the case for Kate and her brother:

He and I are such good friends – it’s one of those things where we’re on the phone, and we’ll both be doing different things. We’ll just stay on the phone to be together… So, it felt natural then when it was like, “I’m cooking,” “Me too,” “Okay, let’s watch each other,” or “Let’s cook together.”

Kate and Ella each desired to be connected for the sake of co-presence, regardless of what occurred on the call. Online foodways provided a conduit for these regular reunions, as participants found it easy to return to familiar activities and connections.

Corporeal telecopresence manifests in several different ways in the examples discussed above. From intentional virtual holiday gatherings to casual FaceTime happy hours, digital commensality comes in various forms. The reinvention of these traditions and rituals helped participants connect to each other and past times and, in the process, made the ongoing hardships of the pandemic a bit more digestible.

**Creativity and Opportunity**

“Here’s a little chef’s trick,” Adam explains as the camera zooms in to a close-up of his hands. “I pull the cutting board forward off the counter a little bit so I can put my hand underneath and scoop right up… boom!” he continues, grabbing a handful of raw onions and mushrooms to add to his shrimp and sausage mixture on the stovetop.

Over to the stove, the camera shows Adam delicately handling the pan’s contents with a fork. “You see how the tails are starting to get a little pink?” Adam
asks before adding, “We are going to go ahead and flip them over. The shrimp are going to take on that excellent flavor from the sausage.”

A comment pops up on the Facebook live stream, “how do we avoid the shrimp sticking to the pan?” Adam looks down at his phone before answering, “After taking it off the heat, give the pan a nice little shake, and it’s going to loosen up any little brown bits that are on the bottom. This is going to be so good, guys!” –Field notes 07/2020.

For several years, Adam has run a popular blog and Facebook group dedicated to sharing simple recipes and creating a global community of foodies. After the pandemic began, Adam increased the number of “cook-alongs” he hosted over Facebook Live, where he would share a recipe in advance and then provide a live virtual cooking demonstration. Followers join in to ask questions about the process and occasionally cook along themselves. Tuning in to Adam’s cook-along for shrimp and grits hints at the creativity and ingenuity demonstrated during the early months of the pandemic, as people seized novel opportunities for digitally mediated co-presence. This section examines the pandemic-specific desire to engage new online foodways: to teach and learn how to cook and oftentimes reconnect with old friends in the process. These practices, as we found, capitalized on new “stay at home” arrangements of living and working that afforded some people more time for culinary activities amidst the constraints of physical separation. The pandemic—as a collectively experienced crisis—afforded a temporal space for sociable performances and other moments of opportunity to reorient cultural connections and meaning-making.

For Adam and other virtual culinary instructors, both professional and amateur, running digital commensality events helped cultivate community. Elena, who worked for a bilingual adult reentry program for ex-offenders, had an idea to keep members of her center connected throughout the pandemic’s early months. This program had served free coffee for in-person visitors, so Elena decided to teach members how to brew specialty cappuccinos at home:

I showed them how to make coffee, and everything was in Spanish... At my dinner table, I set up a stand on the side where I propped up the coffee press and the creamer. I made sure that everything kind of looked nice. It was just one spoon and one saucer and one napkin.

Elena also helped members access the ingredients and equipment for making coffee by locally delivering or shipping items, which allowed them to experience the same sensations, aromas, and tastes while chatting over Zoom. Initiating culinary teaching opportunities like these inspired others to come together while apart.

Many participants reported attending a cooking class or similar gathering during quarantine, including wine tasting, cookie making, bartending, bread baking, and coffee mixology. One culinary student’s in-person courses moved online, and she described baking pastries in her home for a class over Zoom. Others sought
creative virtual outlets for their newfound commute-less time as well as desire for enjoyable human contact:

My partner and I did a coffee tasting class through “Airbnb experiences.” We’re big coffee people. It was a lot of discussion about how to taste coffee and talking about ratios and different ways you can mess with the flavor of coffee to get it to the kind of profile that you want. ~Jill

Food and Wine had an event, a virtual food and wine festival that they normally do in-person. I went to my friend’s house, and we socially distanced and watched the festival and tasted wines. We had ordered like six wines that they were recommending from the events, and we had a charcuterie tray. There were celebrities who were cooking and tasting wine too. That was so fun… For me, it really is important to, you know, to find ways to stay connected with people because being alone for such an extended period of time is… it’s just really important to reach out and connect with folks. ~Jane

Cooking instructors had to adjust to online platforms regarding the pacing, recipe choices, and student interactions. In one cook-along, for example, the host provided a video tour of the setup and ingredient preparation for the ensuing recipe while sharing stories of the equipment and cookbooks. Others learned cooking techniques through less formal avenues, such as Carly’s directions from her mother:

I’m like, “give me the basic instructions. Am I doing this right? Yes? No?” I feel like I need to focus, so I’m not talking. Because if she was here standing next to me, it’d be a whole different setting versus when I FaceTime her to give me instructions.

Participating in Adam’s cook-along, in addition to the testimonies of Carly, Jill, and Jane, highlight how virtual cooking classes simultaneously provide culinary instruction and socialization. Whether sharing a glass of wine or opinions about a dish, participants saw these calls as more than a simple teleconference.

Beyond cooking classes, participants expanded the uses of Zoom and other video calling platforms to satisfy their imaginative inclinations. These events used combinations of pent-up energy, bursts of inspiration, culinary creativity, and familiarity with digital technology and platform design. Original virtual events that participants organized included a BYOB dance party, a “Chopped” event (inspired by the Food Network series, Chopped, where chefs compete to impress judges using limited or special ingredients), a session of painting accompanied by wine, and a children’s school snack time. Some participants took advantage of good weather to create “hybrid” digital-outdoor themed events. Kelly, who had earlier organized a virtual Easter celebration, recounted helping celebrate a friend’s birthday in a unique fashion:

For one of my friend’s birthdays in late April [2020], she really wanted to find a way to celebrate in a way that would allow her to feel connected with people because it was such an isolating time. A lot of our mutual friends had left
[university] for spring break and, for obvious reasons, hadn’t come back… My friends and I organized a picnic for her, with stations. Each friend took a course of the meal, and we each had a different spot. She would walk between stations, and at each station we had one person who called in over Zoom or FaceTime as well. She was able to talk to her friends who were living all over the country, but also be with a friend in-person at each spot.

Kelly utilized video calling’s capacity to connect individuals over vast distances while at an outdoor, novel, socially distanced commensal event, which helped them fight the isolation that they were feeling in the early months of the pandemic.

In addition to cooking classes and creatively themed opportunities, people took advantage of their new circumstances to reconnect with old friends—often friends they had not spoken to in years and with whom they would not have engaged had there not been a pandemic. These reconnections were often transnational or cross-country. For instance, Charles hosted a brunch with a friend, Denise, who was living across the country. They chatted across time zones about politics and current events while eating and cleaning up:

Charles moved his laptop to the top of the fridge, providing a view of his sink as he started to do his dishes from his burger lunch. He had outpaced Denise, who was still working on her meal. As Charles washed, they continued to chat about the upcoming election and how Trump was handling vaccine information. Charles paused for a moment before commenting on how their shared meal must be breakfast for her and lunch for him, given the time difference.

~Field notes 11/2020

Renewed connections with former contacts helped reestablish ties by updating and commiserating about the pandemic over video calls. Importantly, foodways facilitated these conversations by providing a purposeful, focused activity to share instead of sitting awkwardly in front of the screen, not knowing where to begin. Erin described how commensality helped foster long-distanced reconnections and situational co-presence:

There were friends in Canada who we used to occasionally Skype with, but with no food. That just morphed into a happy hour. We are seeing this as, “Hey, we should be reconnecting with our friends who are in other places right now—making sure they’re okay and just strengthening those bonds.”

Reconnecting with friends frequently entailed reminiscing on shared pasts, but these virtual gatherings also generated new memories as Alison’s dinner party with her friend and her friend’s new boyfriend exemplifies:

We were on the call for four hours, stayed up later than we meant to, drank more wine than we planned to—both had a really good dinner and got to know [her boyfriend] really well as if we had been at a dinner party together. Everyone was in kind of a silly mood, like you would be on a Friday with wine with your best friend and her new boyfriend. At the end, I realized I had forgotten about the pandemic for a little bit. It was in April when every-
thing was super scary, and there were so many unknowns. It was one of the only [meetings] that felt like a genuine memory—most of Covid doesn’t feel like a memory, but that was, and I think it was mutual. That really brought us together. Everything was free-flowing—like it would be in-person.

Alison’s anecdote shows how co-presence involving digital commensality can evoke noteworthy moments where pandemic hardships and limitations fade into the background. Food and commensality, here, become vehicles for pleasure and play in an otherwise anxiety-filled time. Though logistically different from in-person gatherings, participants frequently compared positive experiences with online foodways to the best moments of pre-pandemic times. Connecting with friends also allowed for expressions of care, as exemplified by Paul’s decision to order and eat the same food as a friend:

I was like, well, we can’t go out—but that doesn’t mean that we can’t feed each other, you know? I just said to [my friend] one day, “maybe, we could order the same thing. Go get it for takeout or something, and then we could eat together.”

Both Alison and Paul took advantage of their new circumstances to create new memories with friends, offering their presence despite pandemic stay-at-home dictates.

By partaking in cooking classes, creating innovative opportunities, and reconnecting with old friends, and with access to new free time, participants addressed feelings of isolation by organizing and joining digital commensality events while building togetherness among friends, families, and even strangers. These online foodways simultaneously focused on the present nature of memorable moments and pushed the boundaries of the digital-culinary union.

What’s Next?

Following Sandy’s instructions, Jig Cajin, an upbeat tune by the Pine Leaf Boys, blasts out of my laptop speakers as the dinner guests set their tables and pour their drinks. In one Zoom window, Sandy and her husband, Jim, place small bowls with crab dip and sweet peppers down on a white tablecloth. In another, Sandy’s friends Arial and Todd move their laptop camera to focus on plates with crawfish-asparagus tarts and shrimp and corn salad. In the third window, another acquaintance, Jackson, adds a cherry garnish to a fancy cocktail glass and holds it up to the light to inspect the color.

“Tell us what we have here,” Jackson inquires.

“Well, Jim was missing his favorite hometown flavors, so all the dishes for this isolation dinner are Cajun,” Sandy replies before continuing, “You’re eating the appetizers now. Then I prepped the oyster salad and shrimp and
andouille jambalaya, which should be in your ovens now. And, for later, I made the ice cream which is brown sugar, bourbon, and roasted banana that you can cover with New Orleans pralines.”

“It tastes fantastic! You’re really going to have to show me how to make this again when we’re back in-person. Who knows when that will be… we’ll have to have a big party!” Todd exclaims, as the other guests nod along enthusiastically. ~Field notes 08/2020

Sandy had spent hours prepping and driving these ingredients around town to friends’ houses along with a detailed menu and instructions for Todd, Arial, and Jackson to finish the dishes in their own kitchens for their six p.m. Zoom call. Observation of their “Isolation Dinner” revealed that Sandy and her company were using the two previously discussed strategies to foster co-presence: reinventing pre-pandemic dinner party traditions and creatively finding solutions to the physical distance among them. Yet, they were also demonstrating a third strategy, in discussing what was to come and imagining a post-pandemic future when in-person dinner gatherings and corporeal co-presence are possible again. Here, we examine how participants discussed the future, perceived the difficulties and affordances of digital commensality, and reflected on how the pandemic may change how we eat and socialize going forward.

Digital commensality provided space for discussions of post-pandemic aspirations and plans for future get-togethers. For example, when asking Ella what she talked about with her friends during online gatherings to eat together, she responded:

Usually, we discussed how we all want to go on a trip in the future once everything’s done. Or if somebody cooked something really nice, then like chatting about what they cooked or how they have to share the recipes for it. Or talking about how we could go to [a nice restaurant] after everything opens up.

As Ella and her friends cooked and ate together, they appreciated that they could not easily taste what each other were making and would have to wait for eventual in-person gatherings to achieve a full sensory register of experience and connection. This was especially evident during some cook-alongs where virtual instructors lamented not being able to assist their audience:

The instructor, Courtney, pans the camera down one last time to show her finished product: a bowl of seasoned lentils garnished with bright red pomegranate seeds. Courtney begins her sign-off, thanking attendees and offering praises to those who completed their dishes, “I am happy to see you all made it through even with alternative ingredients. Hopefully next time you can join me in my kitchen, and we can cook together.” ~Field notes 09/2020

As Courtney drew the cooking class to a close, she referred to an imagined future where she might be better able to instruct in a setting with physical co-presence.

When reflecting on the future of eating together, participants also anticipated negotiations around proximity given disagreements between personal desires and
professional health organizations’ recommendations on how to gather safely. For example, Carly and Paula each mentioned the uncertainty of planning for upcoming holidays:

I hope we could get together. I know a lot of my family doesn’t go out anywhere. But I just wouldn’t want to take that risk, especially since we have our grandparents, and they’re older and their immune system is way weaker than all of us. You just never know. ~Paula

We’re still gonna try to social distance once the holidays come. We don’t have a large family. I think it’s like maybe 12 of us, or 14 of us. I guess we haven’t really discussed it, but I know that everyone’s still taking their own precautions in their own household. We probably still won’t get together just because they are trying to be safe. ~Carly

These interviews took place in the early months of the pandemic, well before vaccines were on the horizon. People forecast holidays apart from family and friends, mentioning that they wanted to avoid as much risk as possible—the prospect of eating together online helped mitigate their anxieties.

Those interviewed were split on whether they planned to continue eating together online long-term. Some focused on the frustrations of connecting virtually, such as basic technical difficulties that made the prospect daunting. As Paul explained:

Sometimes it’d be kind of difficult. Our service sometimes will cut off, or it would freeze. We couldn’t hear each other, or it would take longer for one of us to connect. It wasn’t as flowy as we would like it, or as it would be in-person... [The pandemic] has been a very drastic and quick change that nobody was ready for. I’m going through my whole life in-person, and then everything goes online. It was a very hard change that I think everybody felt.

Paul noted the clash between the “in-person” life he had and the dramatic move to virtual connection; he appreciated digital commensality with friends but dreaded a future where socialization is all digital. Others claimed that they would not continue their online foodways once in-person gathering was possible. Susan, for example, explained that not all her family members appreciated digital commensality:

If we get back to normal, we won’t keep up [Zoom dinners] because I think my kids think it’s a little weird. It’s a way for my brother to connect with us, but they don’t appreciate that as much as the older people do... They understand it, but they don’t like it.

When imagining post-pandemic futures, some commiserated on their eagerness to get back to corporeal co-presence, with this temporal frame orienting their contemporaneous experiences of lockdowns and social distancing mandates. Still, others found the virtual food-based gatherings an endearing and welcome element of the pandemic. When asked about the future, Alison worried about losing connections she had reestablished during social distancing:
I’m going to be sad when it goes fully back, because no one’s gonna want to give you that prime social real estate time anymore. I would still love to be able to always schedule a dinner with my three best friends—who are in Milwaukee, Chicago, and D.C.—on a Friday night. I loved that, but they’re probably not going to want to after the pandemic is over, you know, after a week of work, go out and do something in real life.

Pandemic-induced separation had opened possibilities for Alison to reconnect with close but geographically distant friends, given their shared availability and desire to engage. Her projection of a return to “real life” and “stolen time” recasts digital commensality as a temporary social fixture. Similar signs of hesitancy mixed with pragmatic understandings also characterized others’ future talk, even as people remained dedicated to continuing digital connections in the coming months with long-distance friends:

We will continue to have our occasional dinners with the friends in Minnesota. I’ll continue to have the lunches with my sister because we’re both working from home for at least the fall. My husband is trying to set up more regular get-togethers with his buddies. Also, with my parents, we might occasionally have a happy hour kind of thing. I imagine that we will continue with a general feeling of comfort talking to people in a video format since we’ve just been doing it. ~Erin

As Alison and Erin demonstrate, some people intended to continue eating together online and saw comfort in it. While some expressed more eagerness than others to see physical separation end, discussing eventual reunions seemed to help ease the stresses and fears of the moment.

During interviews and digital events, participants frequently reflected on how eating and socializing would change as the pandemic progressed and vaccines would become available. Some noted a new appreciation for outdoor dining, while others hypothesized that online eating would become more ubiquitous, drawing on the knowledge, comfort, and infrastructure established during the pandemic. Others planned to invite family members to virtual or hybrid holiday celebrations or promised to maintain contact with rekindled friendships. Many felt encouraged to plan new types of digital commensality events. Regardless of the future talk, almost everyone agreed that they found themselves more comfortable in the digital dining setting than they had expected, as Elena and Jill expressed:

[Zoom eating] is the way that we’re building relationships now. That’s the way that we’re getting to know each other. ~Elena

I anticipate online connection to continue… I’m in a software company, and we can do our jobs from home. We have been. I’m actually in the process of scheduling a happy hour for Thursday. Also, it’s the Midwest—eventually, it’s going to get cold anyway, and people aren’t going to be able to sit and dine outside. I anticipate the virtual discussion and sharing of food is still gonna be a part of my life. ~Jill
Jill and Elena agreed with those who remarked on the positive impacts digital commensality had on their lives and that they imagined would continue.

While participants’ feelings about eating together at a distance varied, all agreed that their involvement in online foodways shaped how they would eat and connect moving forward. The contemporaneous, “in sync” nature of our participants’ pandemic commensal activities allowed them to connect in a time when the safety of physical interaction was uncertain (Chayko 2019). Still, we found considerable ambivalence about the mechanics of what online pandemic foodways entailed, warranting caution in predicting the future of digital commensality.

Conclusions

Eating together is a staple of sociality. The ability to share meals and conversation across a table affirms relationships and sustains community. For the growing body of scholarship on commensality, the perceived value of collective foodways is centered on a foundational premise of physical proximity—the in-person sharing of materials (ingredients, equipment, and meals) and the embodied exchange of sensations (aromas, flavors, and contact) are integral to fostering social connectedness (Jönsson et al. 2021; Julier 2013; Kerner et al. 2015; Warde 2016). What happens in times of physical isolation if you trade the communal table for a shared screen? The circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic through social distancing, quarantines, and stay-at-home measures beg this question.

Recent literature on co-presence at a distance critiques the assumption of required proximate corporality and offers theoretical scaffolding for analyzing the pandemic-specific connections of foodways that emerged after March 2020. Co-presence scholarship decenters the centrality of space in research on sociality, instead focusing on perceived connections and entrainment between individuals (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). This shift has created a pathway for new collaborative work at the intersection of food and media studies, including work on digital commensality. Our project, for instance, has examined corporeal telecopresence (Zhao 2003), centering moments of conviviality achieved through culinary practices experienced at a physical distance but in electronic proximity. Furthermore, our findings offer an alternative direction for future studies of co-presence and commensality by focusing on the temporal and situational dimensions of communal cooking and eating.

We have examined online foodways and digital commensality during the first year of the pandemic. Through interviews and ethnographic observation during video calls, we offer a glimpse into some ways that Americans have adjusted to new circumstances and worked to cultivate togetherness at a distance. As social media and news headlines suggest, video call technologies and platforms were central in easing the social, emotional, and psychological consequences of separation, as diners turned to “Zoom meals” and “quarantine cooking.” Digital commensality helped foster co-presence through a set of temporal strategies within the restrictions of online sociality: people reached into memories and past experiences and reinvented culinary traditions, developed creative new foodways that situated their disrupted present-day realities, and envisioned a post-pandemic future where in-person
community was again possible. These strategies helped friends and family synchronize and contextualized their experiences of the pandemic. This presents opportunities for sociological traditions that focus on the conditions of the interaction order and face-to-face engagement, such as symbolic interaction, to consider the temporal and situational nature of interaction orders within dynamic online spaces.

Our project builds on strategies and tools developed over the course of recent decades for conducting qualitative research within online arenas (Hallett and Barber 2013; Murthy 2008; Pink et al. 2016). In completing the research for this project, we, as researchers, experienced many of the same dis- and re-locations as our participants. We were navigating the new Zoom infrastructure, figuring out online eating etiquette, and trying to stay connected to friends and loved ones. Ethnographic inquiry within and through digital worlds provides an avenue to synchronize with participants and generates insights into creative forms of cultural adaption. Furthermore, “breaking bread” and sharing foodways with participants online eased the tensions of new relationships and helped establish rapport. The use of Zoom and other tools for digital commensality are not only valuable for isolated individuals, but for ethnographers eager to reach distant spaces and connect with research participants. Digital ethnography allows us to bear witness to the modification of social ties and the emergence of novel culinary and gastronomic traditions.

Our project also poses creative provocations for future work on online foodways as meaning-making activities. A more direct comparison between individuals who were already using online foodways before the pandemic and those who started once the pandemic began will help elucidate the processes of cultivating situational but virtual co-presence, as well as critical awareness of its limitations. Additionally, given a wider distribution of vaccines and education about the virus, how will foodways be readjusted once restaurants are fully open and individuals feel safer with travel and routine interaction? Finally, how does inequality and lack of access to technology affect culinary imaginaries and the creation of community? These questions suggest that this is not the last word, but only a pandemic beginning.

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