






From Eating to Cooking: A Case Study of the Development of the TiMAMA Deli & Café and the Creative Reproduction of Taste Based on the Mother's Menu

Yikang Sun¹  , Huiting Lin², and Rungtai Lin³ 

¹ College of Art and Design, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing City 210037, China
sunyikang120110@hotmail.com

² TiMAMA Deli and Cafe, Taipei City 114, Taiwan

³ Graduate School of Creative Industry Design, National Taiwan University of Arts, New Taipei
City 22058, Taiwan
rtlin@mail.ntua.edu.tw

Abstract. Due to the fast pace of work, people are often unable to eat at home. While eating out is convenient, it does entail some health hazards, and it is easy to make eating a formality, simply a means of filling the stomach. It is advisable to turn eating a good meal into a ritual, or to lend it a sense of ceremony. More importantly, good food can inspire people's love for their parents and homes. A restaurant named the TiMAMA Deli and Café in Taipei is used as an example in this study. By communicating with the restaurant's founders, we were able to obtain first-hand information, and then use concepts such as design psychology and communication theory to develop a theoretical framework. Employing a qualitative research method, this study addresses two issues: i) the creation of a feasible model for design thinking in order to intervene in cuisine regarding the relation between form and ritual; ii) overcoming consumers' inherent prejudice against frozen food in order to adapt to the new restaurant business model that emerged during the pandemic period. The results show that the operating model of this restaurant will spread to its peers. Moreover, we wish to draw increased attention to the connotations surrounding eating, which can be summarized as feelings of warmth towards, and love of, home.

Keywords: Eating and Cooking · Home and Family · Transforming Creative · Cognitive Ergonomics · Commercial Operations · Form and Ritual

1 Introduction

People who work fast-paced jobs are often forced to simplify the important process of eating, such as by consuming fast food. Furthermore, many people relocate away from their hometowns for work. For these people, the privilege of eating at the same table as their families becomes a luxury. It is for this reason that many people return home during the holiday season, to eat meals prepared by their parents.

Despite the convenience of eating outside the home, it is important to consider whether these foods are healthy. Although most restaurants are paying increased attention to food safety and are reducing the amount of oil and seasoning used in the cooking process, eating out often can incur some health risks. In addition, such a way of eating, especially when eating alone, can lead people to ignore the meanings associated with eating. In other words, one no longer experiences the pleasure of tasting food. This is one reason why families reunite on specific holidays and gather to enjoy food, which is always an evocative experience. Therefore, the question arises as to whether restaurant cuisine can allow guests to feel the warmth of home, or the taste of a mother's cooking [1, 2].

COVID-19 began to spread around the world in late 2019, and, during the worst phase of the pandemic, many countries required restaurants to reduce their opening hours or even banned people from dining in restaurants. As a result, many restaurants have had to develop take-home meal boxes or frozen foods such as those considered in this study, which can be eaten after a simple and convenient reheating process. What is more, the quality of these frozen foods is not compromised, which allows guests to enjoy a variety of cuisines at home. As the pandemic eases, many stores continue to sell their own frozen food to expand sales channels to those who may not be able to dine in restaurants [3].

Restaurants have offered frozen packaged food for some time. Initially, consumers were skeptical, worrying about the quality of the food and its poor taste after freezing. Because of the pandemic, the sales of frozen food have increased significantly. The pandemic may end in the future, but the way people eat has changed. The question of whether restaurants will take this opportunity to highlight the value of frozen food merits closer attention. For consumers, the ability to enjoy delicious food at home without having to go to a restaurant is undeniably appealing. In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between frozen food and food delivery. Delivery refers to the process whereby a restaurant prepares the food and a courier delivers it to the customer's home (e.g., Uber EATS and Foodpanda). During this process, the food may become cold, which greatly affects the taste. Frozen food, on the other hand, is often packaged using new technologies such as rapid freezing, and customers need to heat it up before eating. It is advisable to turn eating a good meal into a ritual, or lend it a sense of ceremony. More importantly, good food has the ability to inspire people's love for their parents and homes.

In short: eating is the form, and cooking is the ritual. Life without rituals is just living.

The following two issues are discussed in this study:

- (1) The creation of a feasible model for design thinking that is capable of intervening in cuisine in terms of the relation between form and ritual.
- (2) Overcoming consumers' inherent prejudices against frozen food in order to adapt to the new restaurant business model that emerged during the pandemic.

2 Theoretical Framework

Customers are increasingly concerned with the shopping or spending experience [4–7]. Due to the large number of similar services in the market, it has become extremely important for stores to increase customer loyalty (see Fig. 1). Stores must address customers’ needs, as well as the evolving trends in these needs [8–10]. In short, in addition to constantly improving the items they provide, stores also need to keep track of how customers feel. Good communication is essential.

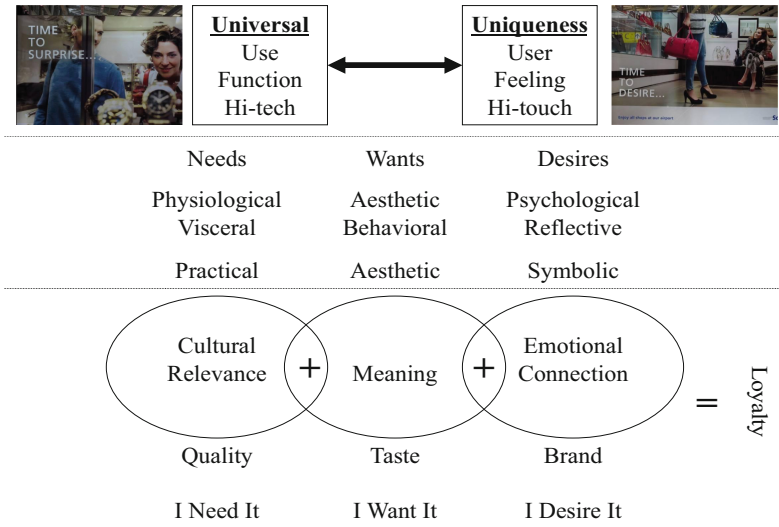


Fig. 1. From “Time to Surprise” to “Time to Desire”. (Source: Reprinted with permission from [11]. Copyright 2013 Lin)

In addition to preparing delicious dishes, chefs must consider many other details. Such questions include how to style both dishes and the decoration and furnishings of the restaurant, how to develop new dishes on a regular basis, and how to design menus that are easy for guests to use. Most important is the question of whether chefs can treat guests like family. Therefore, a good chef may need to possess many qualities. This study argues that these people should combine the characteristics of artists, designers, and psychologists. The core element here is creativity [12–18], this encourages customers to spend money, and allows restaurants to engage in continuous innovation.

Encoding and decoding are widely used in various fields of study [19, 20], and their mechanisms can also be applied to the interpretation of cooking. During the tasting process, guests are in fact participating in a conversation with the chef. Communication theory can further explain this phenomenon. This study believes that guests’ ability to successfully ‘decode’ is an important aspect of communication. Good communication is essential in helping the guest to better understand the chef’s ideas and the connotation of delicious foods. Cooking is an expression of the chef’s creative intentions. Through this process, their imagination, thoughts, and feelings are reproduced. The purpose of

these delicacies is to express ideas and communicate them to the guest in order to ensure that there is an understanding between the chef and the guest [21].

The process whereby a chef prepares high-quality food is akin to that whereby a painter creates a painting, or a designer imagines a product. Therefore, cooking food is an expression of the chef’s pursuit of beauty. It has the following two mutually influencing characteristics: i) the “connotation” is experienced through “form”; ii) the “form” is enriched by “connotation”. Thus, as with painting [22, 23], cooking has a “form” context that transforms an abstract “connotation” into a concrete “form”. Form (style) and connotation (idea) play different roles in this process of transformation. This raises the question of how the relationship between “intention” and “form” becomes the basis for creative thinking in cooking. There seems to be a certain degree of correspondence between “form” and “intention”, namely, to find clues as to the “connotation” in the “intention”. From the perspective of the symbolic communication model, “cooking” occurs in the process of “coding” by the chef and “decoding” by the guest [24–27]. As such, from the perspective of the guest’s “decoding”, exploring the cognition of “cooking” is a helpful means of understanding the creativity of chefs during the cooking process.

There is little interaction between chefs and guests, although this phenomenon is gradually improving. For example, the chef might interact with guests to learn more about their perceptions, and some restaurants allow guests to watch the chef in action. These measures bring the chef closer to the guest. In short, the guests’ feedback will encourage chefs to develop more dishes. Therefore, Norman’s [28] three psychological concepts can be modified into three modes: the chef’s mode, the decoder mode, and the cuisine. The chef is the coder, and the guest is the decoder. Therefore, from the perspective of the “decoding” undertaken by the guest, exploring the cognition of “cooking” is helpful for understanding the process of cooking. Such principles and models also apply to our observation and evaluations of food (see Figs. 2 and 3).

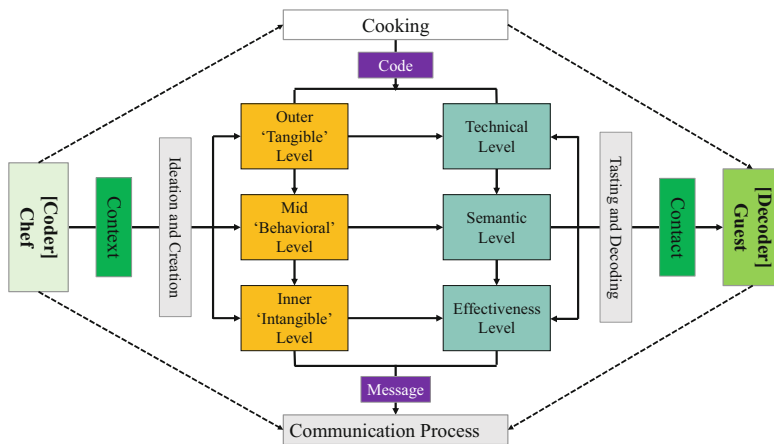


Fig. 2. The communication matrix for evaluating cuisines (Source: this study)

Integrating the above concepts and theories, this study proposes the theoretical framework shown in Fig. 4.

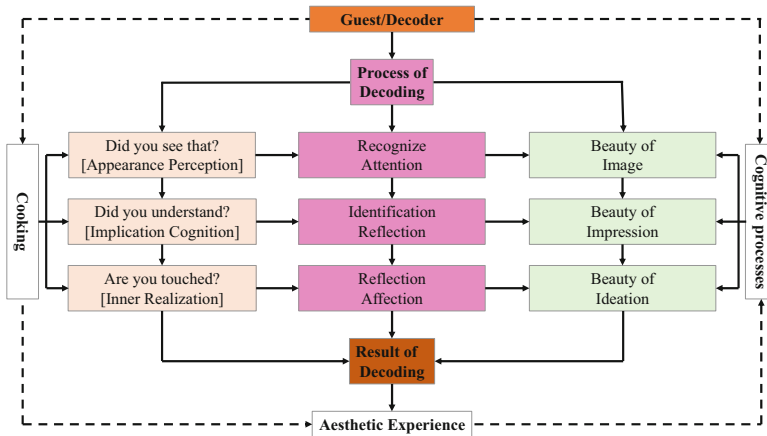


Fig. 3. The cognitive model of the decoder's perception of cuisines. (Source: this study)

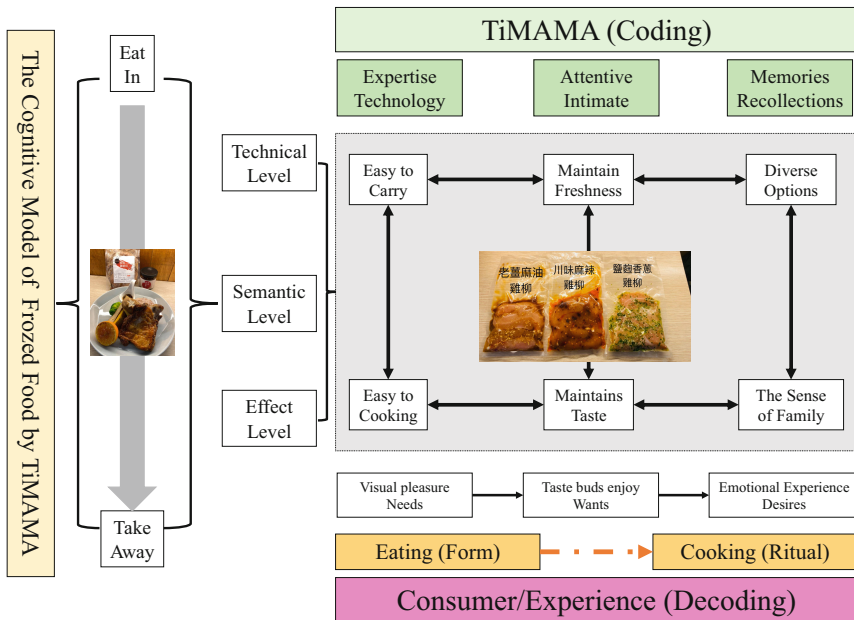


Fig. 4. The cognitive model of frozen food by TiMAMA. (Source: this study)

The components of this structure are further developed into the questions in the questionnaire. The properties outlined in Fig. 4 are explained below:

- (1) **Easy to carry and cook:** occasionally, guests pick up their food from restaurants, and people bring simple utensils to cook with when they go camping. In these cases, the frozen food will be popular if the packaging is lightweight and easy for people to carry.

- (2) **Maintain freshness and taste:** the freshness of the ingredients is the most important thing. With the use of flash-freezing technology, most frozen foods can meet this basic requirement, which most guests are highly concerned about.
- (3) **Diverse options:** each restaurant has its main items, but most restaurants will also introduce new foods from time to time to meet the increasing demands of customers.
- (4) **The sense of family:** many people leave home for school or work and want to eat their mother's cooking every time they come home. These dishes are often made with the simplest ingredients but have connotations of familial affection.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample: The TiMAMA Deli and Café

The TiMAMA Deli & Café was founded in 2008 in Neihu District, Taipei. The owner opened this restaurant with the aim of taking care of her children by herself. She uses local ingredients and a variety of home-made sauces, and combines a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits to create a range of appealing dishes (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The layout of TiMAMA and their cuisine. (Source: Provided by TiMAMA [29, 30])

In recent years, she grew concerned with the stressful and hard work undertaken by parents who prepare food for the household, leading to the launch of a frozen food series (see Fig. 6). These foods allow parents to create a variety of delicious dishes in a relaxed and simple way, so that the family can spend time together while enjoying their food.

The strengths, features, and creative ingenuity of TiMAMA mainly concern the following two aspects:

- (1) Sourcing and making food to the strictest standards, and approaching customers with the attitude of cooking for one's own family.



Fig. 6. Some frozen food series. (Source: Provided by TiMAMA [29, 30])

- (2) Various types of frozen food are provided, and consistent quality is maintained, as the restaurant seeks to break down customer bias against frozen food.

3.2 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consists of three parts (see Table 1). The first part addresses respondents' basic data, including their gender, age, eating style, and whether they have ever purchased frozen food. The second part consists of nine questions, and asks respondents to make judgments based on their subjective feelings; a seven-point Likert scale was used, with scores ranging from 1 ("very low") to 7 ("very high"). In the third part, respondents are invited to add new opinions and suggestions.

3.3 Participants

A total of 71 customers who had dined at TiMAMA participated in this survey (64 women and 7 men). Since only one of the respondents was aged between 18 and 30, this person was combined with the 31–50 age group. There were 21 respondents over the age of 51. Most of the participants were regular customers of the restaurant and found out about the survey from the owner. A total of 48 respondents (67.61%) left additional comments. Moreover, 85.8% of participants had purchased frozen food sold by TiMAMA. Therefore, although the number of participants was fairly small, their feedback had good reference value.

3.4 Data Analysis

Respondents' habits related to cooking, eating out, and buying frozen food were recorded. Then, the results of the respondents' subjective assessments of frozen food were obtained and their mean and SD were calculated. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to conduct analyses of variance.

Table 1. The content of the questionnaire.

Part I	
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> 18-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-50 <input type="checkbox"/> up 51
I-1. Do you often cook?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally (1-2 times a week)
I-2. Do you often eat out?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally (1-2 times a week)
I-3. Have you ever bought frozen food?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally (1-2 times a week)
I-4. Have you ever bought frozen food from TiMAMA?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally (1-2 times a week)
Part II	
II-1. Do you think there are many frozen foods to choose from on the market?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-2. What do you think of the taste of frozen foods?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-3. What do you think of the quality of the frozen foods on the market?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-4. Does TiMAMA offer a wide range of frozen foods?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-5. Is there a big gap between the frozen food sold by TiMAMA and the food it makes in-store?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-6. Is the quality of frozen food sold by TiMAMA guaranteed?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-7. Are the frozen foods sold by TiMAMA easy to cook?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-8. Can you feel the shopkeeper's intention in the frozen food sold by TiMAMA? (e.g., Feel the warmth of home or feel the smell of dishes made by your mother)	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
II-9. Is TiMAMA's intention and the frozen food it sells worth recommending?	Very Low <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 Very High
Part III	
If you have other opinions or suggestions, please let us know. If not, please fill in "None".	

4 Results

4.1 Respondents' Cooking Habits and How Often They Eat Out and Buy Frozen Food

Table 2 shows the cooking habits of the respondents and data relating to how often they eat out and buy frozen food:

- (1) In most families, the mother is responsible for preparing three meals a day. There is a high proportion of women among the respondents, so the number of people who cook regularly is higher (61.97%); about 28.17% of respondents cook 1–2 times a week
- (2) The number of people who eat out often is close to 50%, and 42.25% of the respondents eat out 1–2 times a week. Only 8.45% of respondents do not eat out.
- (3) The proportion of respondents who have purchased frozen food is high (92.96%); additionally, 85.92% of the respondents had purchased frozen food sold by TiMAMA.

Table 2. Respondents' cooking habits and how often they eat out and buy frozen food (n = 71).

Question	n/%	
I-1. Do you often cook?	Yes	44/61.97%
	No	7/9.86%
	Occasionally (1-2 times a week)	20/28.17%
I-2. Do you often eat out?	Yes	35/49.30%
	No	6/8.45%
	Occasionally (1-2 times a week)	30/42.25%
I-3. Have you ever bought frozen food?	Yes	66/92.96%
	No	2/2.82%
	Occasionally (1-2 times a week)	3/4.23%
I-4. Have you ever bought frozen food from TiMAMA?	Yes	61/85.92%
	No	8/11.27%
	Occasionally (1-2 times a week)	2/2.82%

4.2 Respondent's Subjective Assessment of Frozen Food

The mean and SD of respondents' subjective evaluations of frozen foods is shown in Table 3. It is clear that responses were positive for the TiMAMA-related questions. Since most of the respondents regularly visit this store, it is reasonable that they would give it a high rating.

Table 3. The mean and SD of respondents' subjective evaluations of frozen foods (n = 71).

Questions	Mean (SD)
II-1. Do you think there are many frozen foods to choose from on the market?	5.70 (1.38)
II-2. What do you think of the taste of frozen foods?	4.03 (1.08)
II-3. What do you think of the quality of the frozen foods on the market?	4.11 (1.08)
II-4. Does TiMAMA offer a wide range of frozen foods?	5.15 (1.32)
II-5. Is there a big gap between the frozen food sold by TiMAMA and the food it makes in-store?	3.63 (1.61)
II-6. Is the quality of frozen food sold by TiMAMA guaranteed?	6.32 (0.84)
II-7. Are the frozen foods sold by TiMAMA easy to cook?	6.49 (0.67)
II-8. Can you feel the shopkeeper's intention in the frozen food sold by TiMAMA? (e.g., Feel the warmth of home or feel the smell of dishes made by your mother)	6.56 (0.60)
II-9. Is TiMAMA's intention and the frozen food it sells worth recommending?	6.68 (0.55)

4.3 Differences in Views Between Different Respondents

Since there was only one respondent aged between 18 and 30, this respondent was combined in a group with respondents aged 31–50 for ease of analysis. The t-test found

that there were no differences in views between respondents of different genders and ages. ANOVA is a means of revealing differences in views between respondents.

The results showed that there was no difference in perceptions among respondents who regularly cooked or ate out. However, respondents gave different assessments of some of the issues related to whether they had purchased frozen food and whether they had purchased frozen food sold by TiMAMA (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. The differences in perceptions between respondents at different frequencies of buying frozen food ($n = 71$).

		SS	df	MS	F	Multiple Comparisons
II-1. Do you think there are many frozen foods to choose from on the market?	BG	13.804	2	6.902	3.944*	1>2
	WG	118.985	68			
	Total	132.789	70			
II-2. What do you think of the taste of frozen foods?	BG	11.080	2	5.540	5.316**	1>2; 3>2
	WG	70.864	68			
	Total	81.944	70			

Table 5. The differences in perceptions between respondents who have purchased TiMAMA and sold frozen food at different frequencies ($n = 71$).

		SS	df	MS	F	Multiple Comparisons
II-2. What do you think of the taste of frozen foods on the market?	BG	9.583	2	4.792	4.503*	1>2
	WG	72.361	68			
	Total	81.944	70			
II-7. Are the frozen foods sold by TiMAMA were easy to cook?	BG	3.822	2	1.911	4.654*	1>2; 3>2
	WG	27.924	68			
	Total	31.746	70			

5 Discussion

Although the number of people who cook their own meals is not small, a significant proportion of respondents still eat out regularly. In addition, most people have bought frozen food at one time. This shows that the market prospects for frozen food are still broad. It is not difficult for restaurants to invest in this field, but how to differentiate themselves requires careful analysis. Otherwise, they can easily be overtaken by other competitors. TiMAMA's cooking philosophy may seem complicated, but the key is perseverance and adherence to the business's original principles.

Respondents did not rate commercially available frozen foods highly. This indicates that there is still potential for the improvement or enhancement of these products. Respondents were satisfied with the frozen food sold by TiMAMA, which once again proved that TiMAMA's culinary philosophy is successful. However, since the respondents are all TiMAMA customers, further investigation is needed to determine whether other consumers have the same views. In addition, many people may be biased against frozen foods, believing that these foods are not fresh enough, or are of poor quality.

Therefore, the feedback of respondents who have purchased frozen foods is more valuable than the feedback of those who have not. It is necessary for vendors to gather the opinions of these people through a return visit or other means.

The 48 respondents made a number of new proposals, which focused on 2 main areas: 1) respondents hoped that TiMAMA would increase the variety of food products; 2) these people want the cooking instructions provided on the packaging of the product to be further simplified, or for the font size of the text to be increased to make it easier to read.

Of course, there are also minor problems, such as not particularly liking the taste of a certain food. This shows that, at least among the respondents who participated in this study, the acceptance of frozen food is at a relatively high and stable level. These people hope that TiMAMA will develop more products, a reasonable and natural demand from the consumer's perspective. However, for merchants, while developing new products can enhance their competitiveness, there may also be associated risks. In addition, as mentioned above, this type of frozen food can be eaten after a simple preparation process, but respondents may not be sufficiently familiar with how to handle it. At a suitable time in the future, the store could invite these people to the restaurant to demonstrate how to prepare the food in a practical setting. This intervention would also bring the restaurant closer to its guests. All of the comments made by respondents were fed back to TiMAMA.

6 Conclusions

COVID-19 has had an impact on many industries, with the restaurant industry being the hardest hit. The frozen food ordering services launched by restaurants, and represented by TiMAMA, generated a new business model, which not only increases revenue, but also allows consumers to taste a variety of delicious foods at home. More importantly, TiMAMA takes eating, which is a mundane activity, to the extreme, giving foods a personal touch such that they have a positive impact on the emotions of consumers. In other words, when food is regarded simply as a necessity, eating is simply a question of going to a convenience store and buying a loaf of bread. The findings of the present study suggest that the ritual of eating, as well as the meaning and warmth behind these foods, can be enjoyable aspects of people's daily lives.

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