

Creative Ireland: On Your Doorstep
Rowena Keaveny

Number of participants: 4

Age profile: 60's

Location: Birr, Crinkle & Clareen

Duration: 10 hours +

***"Time Spent together over a good meal will unite strangers, deepen friendships and leave people feeling more positive about the world around them."** Andrew Clarke*

National Loneliness Chef UK.

Background: Loneliness is very personal – both because its causes are often complex and individual, and because it can affect our sense of self. Compounded by the restrictions necessitated by Covid 19, the isolation experienced by older people living on their own has been both unprecedented and protracted. Research suggests that we see ourselves in relation to our connections: the neuroscientist John Cacioppo argues that our perception of social connectedness is a scaffold for the self but what happens when that scaffolding is challenged?

Process: In an attempt to better understand the role that shared meals play in combatting isolation, sharing social history, culinary geography and supporting companionship I met with 3 people living alone who have formed their own weekly dinner club. We shared three meals in three different locations travelling through the foods of Indonesia, Morocco, Holland, Turkey and wild foraging in Ireland. Initially I used structured questions before moving onto more open discussions in later sessions, these later went on to form a 10min short film illustrated by a series of photographs documenting the meals made in each location.

Outcomes: From my observations social eating clearly plays a role in the development of community and communities and the happiness of the individuals within that community. The benefits of eating together for this specific group were identified at 3 levels:

- A) Building a supportive community during a global pandemic.
- B) Supporting and reinforcing friendships and companionship.
- C) Mental Health benefits through easing social isolation.

Quotes from Participants:

“It is friendship, socialising and companionship, actually it’s all three for me.” Hans Visser

“Even though you might talk about depressing things or things that are going on in the world, you certainly feel more connected.” Mary Bulfin

**“When you do go out to the dinner outdoors, maybe the hotel, you’re losing that touch of intimacy that you are talking about here, there’s not that openness to the same degree at all.”
Frances Kawala**

“It’s not as much about the food as you might think. It is about the food but it’s as much about the environment and growing the veggies and all of that sort of thing. It’s a way of life. I used to be much more serious about food but I’m not that fussy about food any more. I prefer simpler recipes and just a really nice atmosphere around the table.” Mary Bulfin.

“If you got food and said you weren’t hungry, Dad would get angry and say, ‘You don’t know what hunger is.’ because he did, he lived through the war. He ate every scrap of food on his plate. He never took anything he didn’t want. You could his plate back in the cupboard because it was clean.” Hans Visser

“That was always a problem, not having the experience. I remember when Vesta curries came out. At least you were able to get a flavour of what a curry maybe tasted like.” Frances Kawala