

Cooking, Jazz, and the Art of Improvisation



By Stephen Davis, with
inspiration from Ezelle Theunissen

While I'll admit that food is almost always at the forefront of my mind, it was during a tea-time conversation with my training facilitator at a recent Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training (AIFT) that I stumbled upon the remarkable similarity between jazz and one of my favourite passions and past-times. Let me explain...

The entire AIFT was a fun, engaging and transformative experience, but one of the prescribed readings that resonated strongly with me was a beautifully written and inspiring paper by Frank Barrett. Barrett uses creativity and improvisation in Jazz as a metaphor for organizational learning. Now I've always liked Jazz, or put another way I would listen to it if it happened to be on the radio, or being played in the background. After reading Barrett's paper, I not only discovered my infinite respect and appreciation for the skills of Jazz musicians but I discovered how one of my favourite past-times in life required a very similar level of competence and creativity. And unlike Jazz, that past-time is something that almost everyone can relate to. Cooking!

One dictionary definition for "improvise" reads:

*"Improvise: verb [trans.]
create and perform (music, drama, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation;
produce or make (something) from whatever is available"*

I definitely believe that definition needs to be modified to include culinary activities.

Not that I am by any stretch a cordon bleu chef – or anything more than a good cook in my wife's, families' or friends' opinions – but I realized after reading Barrett's article that what gives me life and inspiration as a person who loves to cook is (without realizing it) I have adopted a mindset of spontaneity, creativity, experimentation, and dynamic synchronization "of ingredients" (to paraphrase Barrett).

Barrett's paper was published in *Organization Science* in 1998, and describes in a masterful manner, the analogy between the art of jazz and improvisation in human systems (such as organizations). He cites seven attributes of jazz, and three of them struck me as being the essential criteria for composing nutritious, healthy – and in my case vegetarian – dishes. I'll elaborate on these three attributes in this article.

The first of the attributes is *provocative competence*, which involves making deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns. The jazz masters are known for encouraging experimentation, loving being in the mess, acknowledging their fear, then diving in anyway. They serve as a reminder to me of how safe I usually play the game of life: admiring the view of the enticing unknown, always about to step off the precipice on the edge of discovery, but never quite doing it. One exception where I have mustered up sufficient confidence in jumping into the unknown is in the area of cooking.

If you pick up any book in the culinary section of a bookshop, you may initially be under the impression that improvisation does not happen in the preparation of food. On second glance you will see that the diversity of styles and the ongoing evolution in cooking and recipes demonstrates that there must be some experimentation and

fusion of food cultures that is leading to all the delectable dishes. I read at the beginning of one such book that what the world needs is more cooks and fewer cookbooks! Not that there is anything wrong with recipe books. Much like classical music requires mastery and perfection of an existing composition, and jazz musicians also have a repertoire of reliable sets to fall back on; a great recipe can also be mastered after much practice and familiarisation. One of my favourite simple recipes consists of little more than spaghetti, parsley, garlic olives, tinned tomatoes, olive oil, and salt and pepper. These days it is a fail-safe combination for me, but at the beginning when I first started cooking it, my limited understanding of the little nuances of how this seemingly simple set of ingredients can be combined led to some less than delectable outcomes.

Many a time I have taken the leap into the unknown, or been forced to make drastic modifications to a fail-proof recipe, only to come up with mouth-watering consequences (this does not imply that I was not at times terrified of the potential outcome while the cooking was in progress).

The second attribute is *embracing errors as a source of learning*. Ben Zander similarly said in one of his talks on the art of possibility, that every mistake made practicing a musical piece should be whole-heartedly celebrated - where mostly when we make mistakes we would probably experience a high degree of aggravation with ourselves. As you'll read below, I've certainly made the odd blunder in the kitchen, but I'm really grateful for the learning and the discovery of what does and doesn't work.

The third essential ingredient for jazz is retrospective sense-making. Only once the jazz piece has been improvised and the audience has appreciated it, will the musicians know how they did what they did, and are then able to reflect on the creative genius that emerged in real-time. It's important that when you have genuine appreciation for your culinary genius to make notes on what worked, ask for feedback from your guinea pigs, highlight key ingredients and bookmark the recipe. When our dinner guests (of whom my wife is the most frequent) give genuine feedback on what I put on the dinner table, that definitely boosts my confidence and informs me for future cooking endeavours. With the freedom to learn from my mistakes I have a safe environment in which to learn and practice.

The more I thought about it, the more strongly the connection of food preparation to jazz resonated with me. I'm admittedly lazy when it comes to shopping for food, and some of my best experiences of cooking have been where I have improvised with what few ingredients we had in our kitchen with the imminent arrival of dinner guests, many cook books on our kitchen shelf, but no recipe to fit the available ingredients. There have certainly been times where the outcome has been slightly less than appetizing. I have learned, for example that soya flour and sweet potato bake probably works better as a type of unsustainable construction material than it does as an appetite inducing and tasty human dish. That particular creation ended up in the neighbour's worm bin (the worms are still alive, thank goodness!) Anyway, the point is that such awful outcomes will arise now and then, but the learning has proved invaluable. I won't be attempting that combination while it remains imprinted in the memory of my tastebuds.

Not only is improvisation in cooking much more fun than having to follow a recipe word-for-word, it is less stressful, and will save you time and money with avoided trips to the shops to fetch that one essential ingredient you forgot to buy. Cooking 'on-the-fly' requires less preparation (once you have developed the fundamental skills), but with a bit of forward planning you can save yourself even more much time and energy. One of my favourite tricks is the impressive 'no-knead' ciabatta bread which requires little more than mixing the simple ingredients 18 hours before (or 12 hours for a great pizza base). This high quality bread takes half an hour to bake and 10 minutes to prepare. Your friends will be encouraging you to give up your day-job after they taste it. Most healthy food tends to require less cooking and processing, so the nutritional benefits are unquestionable.

To quote Barrett again: "Jazz is an activity marked by paradox: musicians must balance structure and freedom, autonomy and interdependence, surrender and control." In the kitchen much the same applies. The basics for making a stir-fry, a white sauce, or a roast rely on a particular structure, but within that structure there are infinite possibilities of blending various ingredients to create something that is flavoursome and wholesome. When you simply don't have the 'right' ingredients in that Jamie Oliver book that one of your friends or your mother-in-law gave you for inspiration, then scout round for what you do have, borrow from a neighbour, tap into the tacit knowledge you've accumulated through uncounted hours cooking in your lifetime, and get messy. If you haven't done much cooking before, then it's high time you discovered your hidden talent and stepped into the unexplored territory of your creative genius.

Resources:

Benjamin Zander on Music and Passion | Video on TED.com. (n.d.). *TED: Ideas worth spreading*. Retrieved January 14, 2011, from http://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html

Brown, E. E. (1970). *The Tassajara Bread Book*. Boulder: Colorado. Shambala. Print.

J. Barrett, "Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* v.9, n.5, September-October 1998.