

# The Cupcake Network

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▶ a transformation design project

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# Ethnographic Research

→ based on thesis topic/interest

Currently, I am in the process of developing my thesis for an MFA in Communications Design at Pratt Institute. The topic of interest relies on 1st generation latino immigrants living in the United States. More specifically, my thesis will explore how communication barriers are elicited from the interchange of language and cultures; how it affects and reshapes identity, and determines our place within society.

In order to address my public properly, I crafted an ideal ethnographic background

that fits my topic and proceeded to search for a stranger that suited my criteria.

The intention was, to begin a dialog and build a relationship of trust that would allow me to understand my public's needs without assumptions. To inform myself with real stories and identify how one person's specificity could influence my work in order to offer him/her, through design interventions, real life solutions.

/ gender: **female**  
/ age: **25-45**  
/ marital status: **single/married**  
/ language: **mainly spanish**  
/ education: **high school**  
/ religion: **conservative**  
/ citizenship: **latin american I**  
/ immigration status: **legal/illegal**

## WHERE TO MEET SUCH PERSON?

### > PLACES OF LEISURE

Engage in casual conversations with people during their free time. While they're comfortable. A work environment would be deceiving because people's behavior is structured & politically formulated.



# Outreach Methods

→ approaching strangers

**Red Hook Park**, in Brooklyn, is known for its active soccer fields and succulent latin-american food stands. I arrived with my picnic blanket, purchased some treats and sat on the lawn in front of a Mexico-vs-Colombia game.

Lots of people, mostly from hispanic descent, gathered around the fields to enjoy the weather and spend the afternoon with family and friends.

Randomly, I engaged in a conversation with a 9-year old boy named Alejandro, who was playing by himself with a soccer ball right next to me.

Immediately, I met the boy's parents, Elizabeth and José, a Mexican couple who have been living in the US ten years, and began an afternoon long conversation with them about their lives as immigrants, the english language and its advantages, work opportunities, differences in our personal latin backgrounds and life far away from family.



► meet

## Elizabeth Hernández



Selfless, guileless, grounded & joyful. She is a devoted, content wife and mother who dedicates her entire self to attend, organize and nurture her family's routine.

At age 16, she moved from Mexico to the US with her boyfriend José, mainly “out of curiosity.” For the next ten years, they have established a life in New York along with their two children, Alejandro and Lorena.

While Elizabeth works part time cleaning private homes and offices to support and provide for her parents in Mexico, her husband is responsible for their household income, so she spends most of her time with her children and managing the house.

Today, at 25, she is a mother of two, Alejandro (9) and Lorena (7), who were born & raised in the US. Their interesting family dynamic relies on the interchange of language in which the children speak solely in English, and the parents only in Spanish.





# identified problems

► elizabeth's everyday hardships

Given the struggle of her teenage years, having to work to help support her family in Mexico, and not being able to finish high school, Elizabeth developed a strong “work” mentality which does not allow for any sidetracking. For example, nurturing her own interests.

Her early marriage and motherhood (at age 16) have not conceded her time for herself, having to prioritize and stand by the family's needs. Furthermore, her ambiguous status in the US and her lack of

English detract her from running her life autonomously, falling into dependency on her husband and the activities/dynamics of HIS extended family.

In our first conversations about her weekly schedule, I asked **“what do you like to do for yourself?”** to which she replied with self realizations, “I don't do anything for myself.”

**But gradly, digging deeper I was able to uncover her passion for baking.**

1. dependency
2. language barriers
3. cultural differences with children
4. legal status in US
5. male dominant family dynamic
6. unwillingness to break routine
7. limited access to technology
8. conformity/compliance
9. conflictive avocation:  
technical struggle with baking

# steps towards solutions

→ criteria for success: intentions/expectations

1. Introduce potential bonding activities to establish other levels of connection with her children that go beyond educational legacy. To restore the parent figure that due to language/cultural barriers, her kids are soon to be outgrowing.
2. Find ways to facilitate the exposure and practice of her interests. Institute the importance of cultivating and honing personal avocations.
3. Offer new experiences - allow her to spark and reinvigorate that intrepidity/curiosity/adventurous aspect that characterized her when younger.
4. Allow to voice out and possibly reflect on self / life / choices /priorities / impediments / recreation.

► micro-intervention 1

## Yoga Video

While spending time with Elizabeth's family, Lorena, her energetic and astute daughter, mentioned that she loved Yoga, after being introduced to it once in gym class. Her parents, although indifferent about the practice of this discipline, attempted to send her to classes, but found them unaffordable.

I thought of it as an opportunity for creating a bridge between mother and daughter while exposing Elizabeth to a new activity that is spiritual and active. (Just as José and Alejandro share an interest for soccer.)

### THE DELIVERABLE

A bilingual, customized, 5 minute Yoga video that introduces the "Surya Namaskar" (salutation of the sun), which is the initial exercise to every Yoga class.

Simple to follow, contains written language that both girls can digest, and reflect/depics a setting in which they can both share the experience side by side.



**NAMASTE**  
(saludo)

**NAMASTE**  
**Elizabeth**



**NAMASTE**  
**Lorena**



# YOGA

  
**NAMASTE**  
(saludo)

RESPIRA:  
INHALA



Elizabeth

AIR  
IN



Lorena

INHALA  
PROFUNDO



AIR IN  
BIG



EXHALA  
DESPACIO



AIR OUT  
SLOW



INHALA



AIR IN



EXHALA  
DESPACIO



AIR OUT  
SLOW



INHALA



AIR IN



EXHALA



AIR OUT



INHALA



AIR IN



EXHALA



AIR OUT



INHALA  
AGUANTA



AIR IN  
HOLD IT



EXHALA  
DESPACIO



AIR OUT  
SLOW



INHALA



(ÚLTIMA VEZ)

AIR IN



(LAST TIME)

NAMASTE  
Elizabeth



NAMASTE  
Lorena

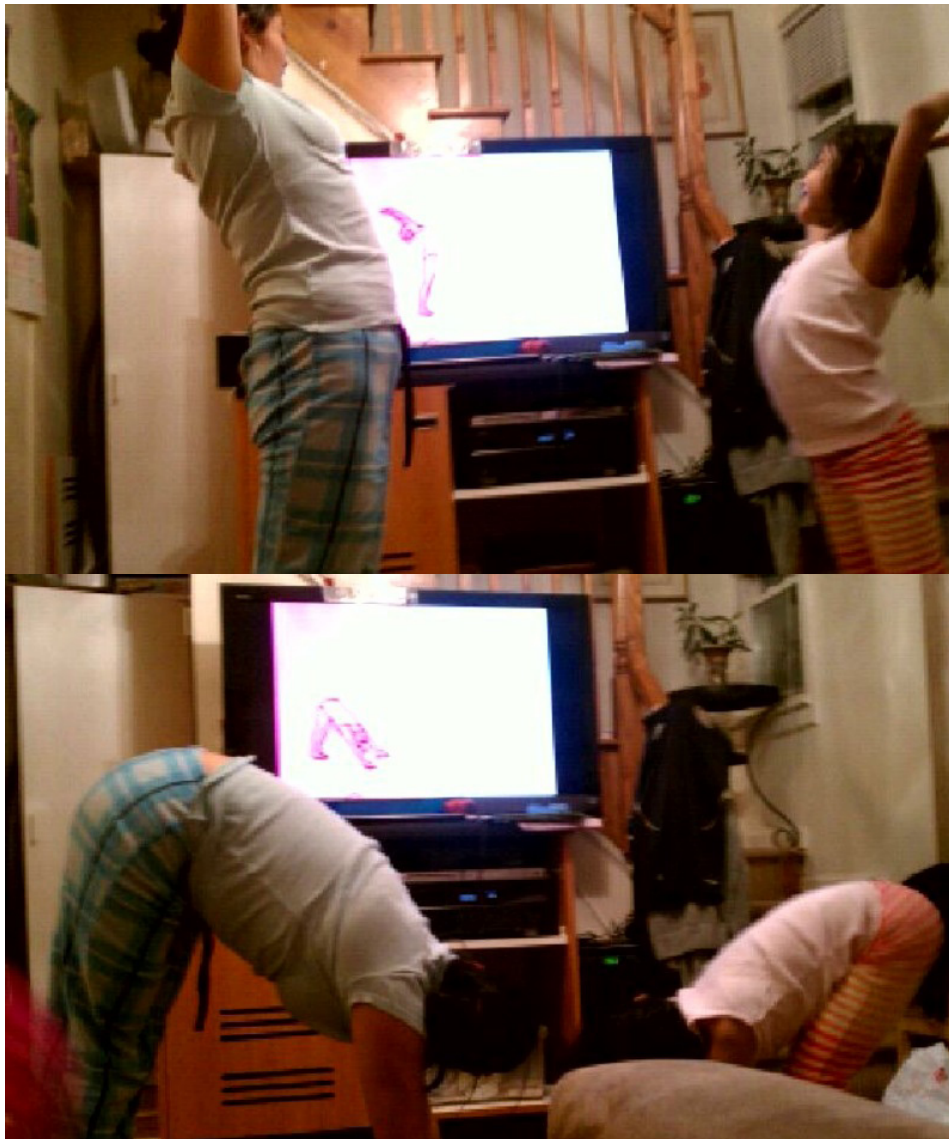


THE END



► micro-intervention 1: Yoga Video

## Results & feedback



### FEEDBACK

Although Yoga does not appeal to her enthusiasm, Elizabeth enjoyed trying something different and appreciated the fact that she was able to do so at home. She expressed that the video was “easy” to follow and was aesthetically pleasing.

Lorena on the other hand, was so enthralled about the video she repeated the cycle various times. Then, she asked her father to download more videos for her to keep practicing.

### ADDED VALUE

José played an important role in the technological setting. He figured out a way to display the video in their big tv screen to activate the space and enable the exercise aspect of the intervention. His gesture of moving things around to please “the girls” is not so common within their household. He even provided the supporting documentation and sent a “thank you” note for the project.

Anticipated and surprising accomplishments aside, Elizabeth’s interests were not lured enough to keep exposing herself to the practice of Yoga. So, NEXT!

The one moment in which Elizabeth expressed/revealed a personal interest was when she mentioned baking her “Tres Leches” Cake.

Her most satisfying experience for her is for people to tell her how delicious her cake is.

The problem with this activity is that she loves the making but gets often frustrated by the process, due to lack of tools (she improvises with what’s available), messiness and time taken away from her family obligations. It takes her 4 hrs to complete the pro-

cess of making this particular cake.

Pairing up her passion with her selfless, giving personality, I adapted her recipe to a system that facilitates and condenses the process of baking while exposing her to a new approach: Tres Leches cake into single serving cupcakes.

**The packaging would become the element in which Elizabeth could expose her new recipe, get feedback and for once, play with the idea of a potential business model.**



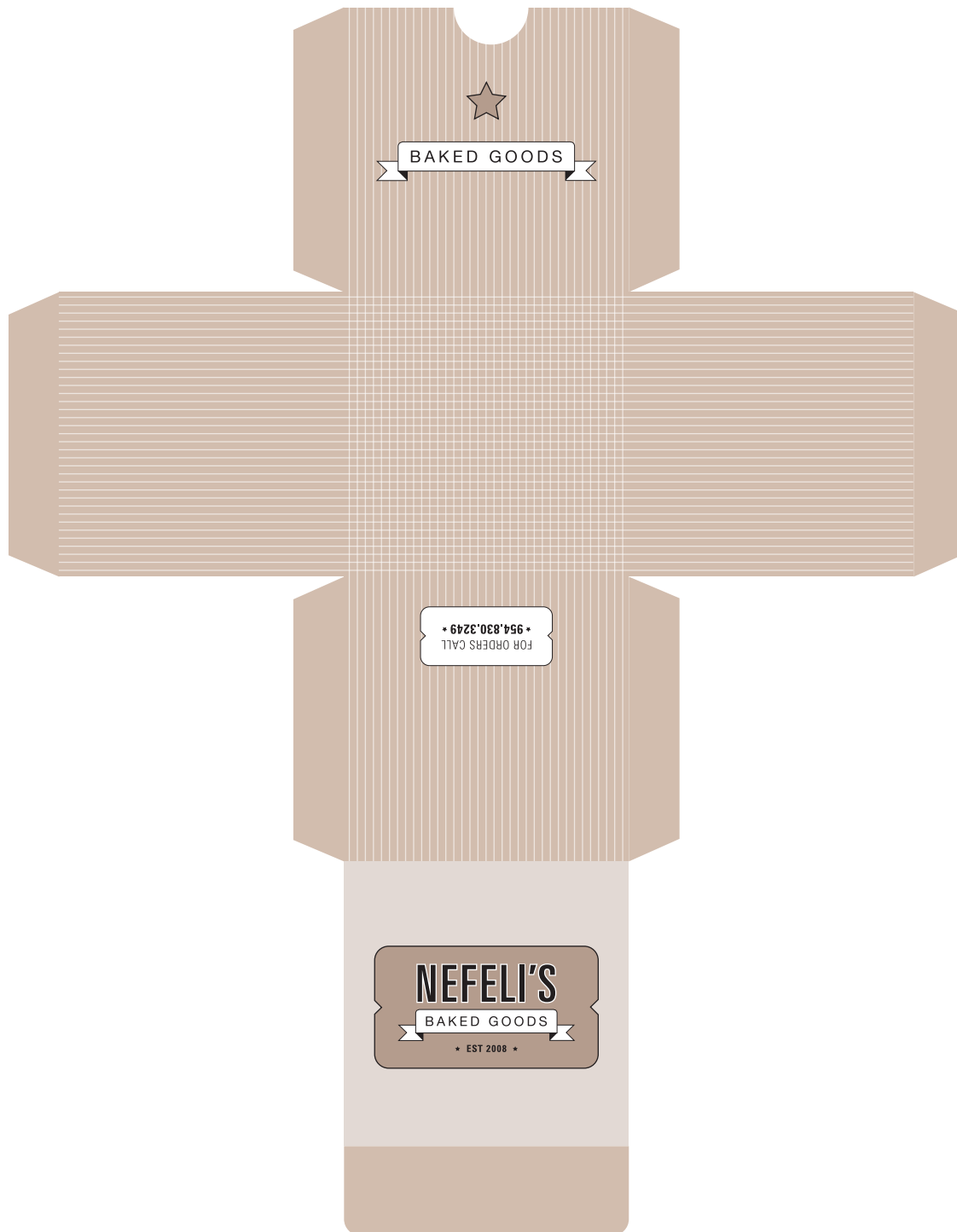
► micro-intervention 2

## Baked Goods Box

Due to Elizabeth’s time constraints, I tested out the “baked goods box” experience through Nefeli Stavrinidi, a friend who also enjoys baking and shares the giving and selfless characteristics that the interventions relies on.

Nefeli followed the new recipe, which in fact took her about an hour to make (1/4 of the time Elizabeth takes to bake her cake), and proceeded to share the piece with her neighbor Nita Patel, who was happily surprised and asked for the recipe.





► micro-intervention 2: baked goods box

## Results & Feedback

Although Nefeli enjoyed the baking process and the gift aspect of the intervention, her situation, lifestyle and priorities differ from those of MY public.

This model had to be tested by Elizabeth herself, after applied adjustments deduced from supplemental feedback of fellow MFAs and self realizations after prototyping.

### CONSIDERATIONS

- / The box does not reflect Elizabeth's persona.
- / The box and system should not reflect a business agenda.
- / The system should include a feedback element.
- / The system should be expansive and long lasting.

### “Ideal job - in an ideal world”

Elizabeth rephrased what she had communicated in the past about baking as an “ideal job,” making clear she would NOT attempt to dedicate herself entirely to baking because it would take away from her attention towards her family.



# External research

► self-sourced readings

## Is Pure Altruism Possible?

Judith Lichtenberg - NYT article

One of the big questions of the Cupcake Network has been: How to frame giving for giving's sake?

MY intention with this project was to ensure that Elizabeth gets outside of her comfort zone and exposes herself to new conversations through a vehicle she can take ownership for and has confidence about (her baking). As Lichtenberg describes, "The feeling that loving your children more than yourself is hard-wired lends plausibility to the theory of kin selection."

According to this article, Elizabeth's role (which I bestowed upon her) within the CN model falls in a grey area between altruism and egoism. She does it because she loves baking. Would she ever continue it out of love? But giving the cupcakes to strangers for free... She enjoys the feedback, but the purpose of the project is to also cast upon others the care and warmth that she provides to her loved ones.

This article, which talks about the biological, evolutionary theories and ordinary interpretations of "true" altruism, questions the level of selflessness that relies on the "warm glow" people get when feeling good about doing good. Why even question that? Actions (good actions) may have multiple motives and as long as they carry the goods, they are serving the right motivation.

## The Kindness of Strangers

Design Observer - Dialogue. Moderated by Julie Lasky

A heated argument about the social design phenomenon between Valerie Casey, noted designer, and David Stairs, editor for design-altruism project, who aggressively questions the value and intentions/motivations behind several design advocacy activities and organizations. His concern is that these efforts don't provide "guarantees of lasting change" and complains about the arrogance of the "industrial north" as he calls Americans in this field, claiming they believe to have the right answers which to him, are based on self-righteous assumptions.

And to add to his indignation, he claims this new wave of "social designers" are "beginning to see altruism as potentially profitable."

"Perhaps it's time for designers to stop talking altogether and practice listening."

"Stay awake. Create your own opportunities. Consider yourself individual only in the context of a larger community. Give back."

## Theory of Gift Economy

(Inspiration)

"Realize that gift giving creates positive relations, through direct satisfaction which creates bonding communication & community."

"Restore the Mother image as the human image and gift giving as the human way."

"Empower ourselves with gift values; gratitude, community, turning towards the earth, spirituality. Pay attention to needs & validate empathy. Learn to receive and give with dignity and sensitivity. Validate those values not only by doing gift giving practically, but consciously."

The motivation to reach out to a stranger has been investigation, but although it feeds to self-interest, the intentions behind all the work done with and for Elizabeth, became solely about attending her needs. Socially driven design work, specially the kind that deals with a small, specific public, requires a level of relinquishment of our accustomed design thinking/process/practice. In dealing with people directly, your humanity and perception is what needs to be heightened in order to respond properly to the unpredictable nature of human behaviour

Personally, the wonder of working directly with and for one individual, addressing only her specificity, has been eye opening and mouth shutting. It allowed me to deeply contemplate on her true necessities, but also obliged me to examine my own values and judgements, to best serve HER reality.

Real-world insight collected from Elizabeth's experience with the offered design interventions, ensured honest feedback and real opportunities for future iterations that will positively impact her life and allow for a level of change.

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U :@ 1 ♣ & > 1 ♣ 4 3

3 :)

► final project

# The Cupcake Network

Adopting the mentality of gift economy, I provided a system in which Elizabeth could expose her baking by giving away single serving treats as a reflection of her selfless attitude and giving personality, while refining her skills, harnessing her passion, and getting the chance to receive real world feedback in order to feel empowered through an activity she enjoys.

She distributed the cupcakes IN PAIRS amongst 6 individuals outside of her comfort zone. Those six individuals kept one cupcake and passed along the other to someone else in order to amplify Elizabeth's network of feedback.

The Tres Leches Cupcake recipe became even more customized with parts of Elizabeth's own whipped topping, maintaining the speedy process but ensuring better texture and taste.

The deliverables were encased in a sin-

gle treat gift box that reflects the intentions of the project and Elizabeth's persona: pristine / neat / considerate and practical in construction / transparent to demystify suspicions about a free (comestible) good. The design also attempted to evoke warmth through earth-colors and texture of the printed elements. It was meant to be delicate but alluring enough to entice consumption and eradicate hesitation in the tasting of the dessert.

A blog: [cupcakenet.tumblr.com/](http://cupcakenet.tumblr.com/) hosts replies/notes/suggestions for Elizabeth, who did not access these engines on her own, but could then be translated into printed media to provide her with documentation of her feedback loop. (Still pending)

Criteria for success: The process was designed to be seamless, fluid and enjoyable for her to participate.

## A way to self indulge altruistically

- / To stimulate self-fulfillment
- / Motivate her enthusiasm & interests
- / Bring attention and give importance (within her family) to HER personal satisfaction.
- / Heighten the pleasure of making with the satisfaction of giving.

### Identifying HER public

- / English speakers that are in her social circle but don't have a close relationship to her.
- / School teachers and parents. As a form of ice-breakers

### Ensuring feedback

- / Through the language of the box and the blog, people are discretely casted in the role of food critics:

Elizabeth would like to know what you think about her new "tres leches" cupcake recipe...

Good? No great? Sweet enough? Spongy enough?  
Moisty enough?

Honesty is key for the improvement of Liz' baking ventures.

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► elements provided to Elizabeth

## Tres leches cupcakes

September 11, 2009 By Connie Veneracion 77 Comments

Tres leches literally translates to three milks. The cupcakes (traditionally, a whole cake) are baked then soaked in a mixture of evaporated milk, sweetened condensed milk and cream. Can you imagine the rich velvety texture? The incredible aroma? The surprising thing is how the cupcakes do not crumble or get soggy after all that soaking. Speedy and the girls loved these tres leches cupcakes. There was a fight to get the last piece was gone from the fridge and both girls were complaining about how they were only able to eat so few pieces. And I baked a total of 18 cupcakes.



### cupcakes de 3 leches

{ Duración: 1 Hora }

#### INGREDIENTES



While the cupcakes are warm, poke holes in them all the way to the bottom. Several holes per cupcake, about a dozen to a dozen and a half. I used a wooden toothpick at first, it didn't work (the holes were too small) so I got a bamboo skewer (barbecue stick) and used that instead.



Get your three milk mixture and brush it little by little on the tops of the

- \* 6 huevos grandes
- \* 1/4 cucharilla de baking soda
- \* 1/4 cucharilla de sal
- \* 1 taza de azúcar
- \* 1/2 taza de mantequilla derretida
- \* 1 taza de harina
- \* 3/4 taza de leche evaporada
- \* 1/2 taza de crema
- \* 3/4 taza de leche condensada
- \* crema batida
- \* canela

#### RECETA

- Precalentar el horno a 325oF.
- Colocar los posillos de papel en el molde.
- Tamizar la harina.
- Batir las claras de huevo con el baking soda y la sal.
- Añada las yemas de huevo y el azúcar.
- Continúe batiendo despacio 30 segundos.
- Añada la mantequilla derretida y continúe batiendo.
- Añada la harina poco a poco mientras bate a mano para evitar grumos. Continúe batiendo despacio hasta que todos los ingredients queden bien mezclados.
- Vierta la mezcla en los posillos de papel solamente hasta la mitad.
- Hornee los cupcakes a 325oF por 25 minutos.
- Mientras tanto, mezcle las tres leches: leche condensada, crema y leche evaporada.
- Mientras los cupcakes siguen calientes, haga 10 huequitos hasta el fondo en cada uno de ellos usando un palillo mas grueso que un mondadientes.
- Añada la mezcla de las 3 leches con un pincel de cocina por encima de los cupcake. Espere que el jugo se absorba antes de volver a pasarle el pincel. Repita 3 veces.
- Deje que se enfríen.
- Añada la crema batida encima y ponga un poquito de canela encima para decorar.



sugar



condensed milk



eggs



flour



salt



evaporated milk



cinnamon



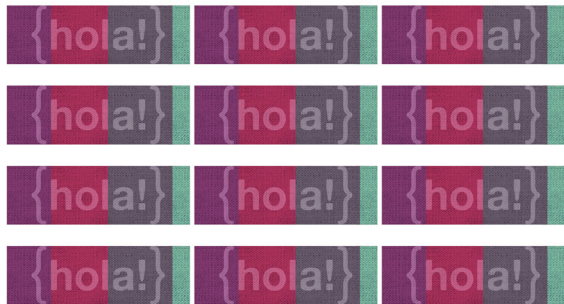
whipped cream



baking soda



butter



# CUPCAKE NETWORK

*Elizabeth Hernandez's baked goods community*

30  
11 / 2011

## How was the 3 Leches cupcake?



Elizabeth would like to know what you think about her new “tres leches” cupcake recipe...

Good? No great?

Sweet enough? Spongy enough? Moisty enough?

Honesty is key for the improvement of Liz' baking ventures.

Any suggestions are welcome!

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[Permalink](#)

[0 Comments](#)

► final project

## Elizabeth's feedback

She took pleasure from the process of switching from cakes to cupcakes and feels it is something she will adopt because as she expressed, "it is more attractive for children."

"I made so many batches already that Alejandro has gained weight."

"The recipe makes it easier and quicker for me to bake and the ingredients supply for various servings, so it saves money too."

The perfecting of the recipe included controlling the moist heart of the cupcake, fluffing the dough and thickening the frosting for better texture.

She mentioned the boxes were "very pretty," easy to assemble and sturdy enough so the cupcakes didn't touch the edges and everything remained neatly packed. Also easy to stack them and move around.

People responded well to the packaging and she mentioned that it helped "sell" the content.



# personal assessment

► success & opportunities for improvement

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I believe the project fulfilled its criteria in the sense that it exposed Elizabeth to new experiences: it gave her a new possibility (the recipe adjustment into cupcakes) to relief the burdening aspect of something she loves doing, facilitating the practice of her interest. It also got her out of her comfort, made her communicate with new people, and enabled her to play the “giver” role outside of her home.

In a reflective level, it allowed Elizabeth to focus on herself finding out that her family is supportive and responds well to making her the priority.

It sparked her curiosity to learn more about the technology facet of the project: she visited the blog and mentioned she would not need a supplemental printed documentation of the comments (since she can already read them online).

Although we encountered awkward moments and she showed some reluctance when receiving the boxes and ingredients, she quickly became excited about the process of baking by attempting to perfect the recipe (testing it three times) before delivering the cupcakes.

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The biggest challenge has been, and will be, to get people to actually go to the blog and supply a response. (still pending)

The feedback component of the project needs to be revised as to not be more direct and not so dependable on a leap of faith: at the moment when the delivery of the cupcake takes place.

Another aspect where I believe the process needed a revisit, was the involvement of Elizabeth in the shaping of the project. At some points, she didn't understand the purpose behind our efforts, but I kept going anyways expecting her to make sense out of everything while engaging in practice. I did not consider the element of mutual collaboration and that ultimately, I am designing to serve HER.

Fornunately, as she found herself explaining providing explanations to strangers, she adopted and expanded on the story of her testing out her recipe.

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► system adaptation

## future applications

The Cupcake Network was designed with a future in mind but with its dependency on collaboration between Elizabeth's baking and my packaging design. It enables a space for Elizabeth to test out more recipes while I adjust and rework the box design to suit new content.

She has once again made clear she does not have an interest for making a business out of this model. The cupcake baking process and packaging would be something she would keep experimenting with for more private/family events.

When I asked if it would become a burden if it would be a job, she replied: "órale" (a mexican slang term meaning "right on").

In terms of expansion and adaptation of this system to serve a broader public, the Cupcake Network was designed to fit Elizabeth's specificity in personality traits, lifestyle and personal interest, but the combination **{gift-giving + passion}** in order to build network and community is proven to be empowering, fulfilling and possibly lucrative.

In contrast with Elizabeth's intentions, realistically, people's efforts deserve compensation. Figuratively speaking, if a non-for-profit online network would become focussed on one-time gifts as proof of concept to expose one's talents to prospective clients, it could be a compelling tool.

The CN system can be adapted and reworked to fit someone else's passion and expose their craft, but the gift-giving componet is essential to reflect the sincere tonality of offering a platform to make, create, improve and reflect on an activity that brings you joy.