



Celia Cheng

Founder, *Cravings*



Celia Cheng launched the webzine *Cravings* (findyourcraving.com) in 2005 as a guide to tantalizing food and great restaurants. It began as her M.F.A. thesis for the School of Visual Arts Designer as Author program (where she was my student), but quickly grew into a full-time pursuit. *Cravings* has allowed Cheng to combine her passions for dining, traveling, writing, and design, and her following of many thousands has grown along with her. She's also been able to use her expertise from her design management consulting and online advertising work to develop *Cravings*—which sports a recently updated design—into a fully fledged online magazine. *Cheng's background is as richly varied as the dishes she extols*: She was raised in Taiwan and Hawaii, and has lived and worked in Japan, so she's fluent in Chinese and Japanese as well as English; she has a B.A. in Japanese Studies from Columbia University as well as her M.F.A. from SVA. *The web has made it possible for her to leave the worlds of advertising and consulting for a 24/7 food adventure*. We talked about the ways in which passion makes entrepreneurship all the more satisfying.



STEVEN HELLER

Print contributing editor, author, co-chair of the Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts

CELIA CHENG

Founder and co-editor (with her sister, Cynthia Cheng), *Cravings*

What was your impetus for starting *Cravings*?

Cravings is the culmination of my love for food and my passion for design. When you dine out, it's the entire experience that you judge the restaurant on—the food, the décor, the service, and so on. Eating out is like theater: Diners are excited to see what will be presented, and restaurants prepare tirelessly to unveil the show. With *Cravings*, I wanted to create that same type of overall theater experience through design. And with interactive design, there are so many opportunities to do so. The goal of *Cravings* is to bring the dining

experience to life, so that you can taste, smell, and enjoy what's being reviewed. [The word "craving" is synonymous with "desire." Some people say food is the new sex. How do you respond to that?](#) I love it! I was just in Taipei and Tokyo, and in both places I realized that trying to explain the word "craving" is not so simple. There's no direct translation in either Chinese or Japanese, and in both cases I had to use the translation of "desire" as an introduction. I think that in all languages, "desire" has a tinge of sex imbued in the word. [So you're a food pornographer?](#) Food is like sex in that it's the sensory that drives the experience. I often find my descriptions of dining experiences to be rather sexual, not in an explicit way, but just enough to titillate. I like to think of Cravings as food porn (maybe soft food porn), as every aspect is meant to be visceral. Our descriptions of each dish should make you hungry and salivate, as should the images and the changing color palettes. [Whatever food is the "new" of, do you sense that design is playing a large or larger role in food than when you began Cravings?](#) Absolutely. In the restaurant world, in addition to focusing on cuisine, restaurateurs are also investing more these days in interior and identity designs. The James Beard Foundation Awards, the Oscars of the food world, has categories for graphic and interior design. The recent redesign of [menupages.com](#) by Mucca Design is another example of how important design has become. Since it first launched in 2002, Menupages grew its user base quickly through its ease of use in finding restaurant menus in key cities in the U.S., but the initial design of the site didn't give it a very compelling identity. The redesign is an upgraded identity that is sophisticated and fun, modern and relevant. It

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makes me want to visit the site more. [Cravings is an entrepreneurial venture that started with design as its engine. How would you characterize the kind of design that makes Cravings succeed?](#) We have a very strong identity. Cravings is not just the name of the website, but the universal theme that links all of our content. To build upon that conceptual foundation, I wanted color to play a key role in the site, not just as an embellishment or afterthought. The different color palettes in each section and feature give us a unique identity. The colors are very palatable to induce cravings in the same way the words and images do. Even when choosing typefaces, the consideration was, "Does it look good enough to eat?" When you come to Cravings, we want to make sure it's a complete experience—a treat, visually and intellectually. [Do you believe that there is a distinct approach to graphic design when food is the main concern?](#) Yes. Graphic design in relation to food needs to trigger our senses. I think it's easy to say that when it comes to food, photography is important because that's the most direct way to present this subject matter. But if that's the only perspective, it becomes too literal and repetitive. Language and wit have to come into play with the visuals for the overall design to be truly successful. It's like a game of seduction: You have to find the balance of what to give away up front and what will keep your audience interested. [You've expanded Cravings from simple reviews to more extensive reports, interviews, and events. How far do you intend to go?](#) There's really no limit. Our growth has been very organic. Each addition in content or service has been in response to our audience's feedback. Readers are interested not only in the dishes they eat at the restaurants but also the personalities behind the chefs cooking them, so it made sense to add chef profiles and Q&As.

Similarly, we had achieved our goal of making people hungry whenever they visited Cravings, but part of our mission is also to help satiate those cravings, which is why we started doing events—to take readers to taste the food we were raving about and meet the chefs. In the same vein, we wanted to make the topics we talk about a little more tangible, so we started Baking Fridays, a sweepstakes



in which we give away food-related goods. Disseminating information is great, but our world is very interactive, so we have to think of ways to bring people back and create a community. Luckily, since everything we do revolves around eating, drinking, and traveling, you can imagine how much fun it is for us to think of new ideas to implement. [Everyone's got to eat. But how do you keep a website about food tasty, without resorting to "real life" game stunts?](#) Our focus at Cravings is seeking out what's good, not what's new or what's hot right now. I'd rather talk about the secret behind the success of a restaurant that's been around for 20 years than the hip new restaurant that just spent \$10 million on its décor, unless its food is phenomenal. It's about quality and how you want to live your life. Our readers have similar ideals and sensibilities, so they appreciate the tips and perspectives we provide. [What's next in the Cravings universe?](#) We just launched a redesign of Cravings. The identity of the site remains the same; the success of the site has always been the colors and styles of its design. This redesign has just helped to bring out those strengths even more. Two things that we focused on were how to use design to better organize information, and how to make navigating the site a more beautiful experience. Both of these things, again, relate to the overall experience of the site, and how Cravings differentiates itself from other food websites through our passion for design. In the next couple of months we'll launch a new section called Murmuring, an open forum where readers can discuss and share information. At the same time, I'm still working on how to make that user interface unique, user-friendly, and beautiful. **P**