

A Matter of Taste

Suzanne L. Wagner

Presented December 10, 2007

134th Season of the Chicago Literary Club

The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness
of mankind than the discovery of a star.

—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin
The Physiology of Taste, 1825

He was only eleven, but he'd come with a list: snails, frog legs, rabbit . . . Foods he'd never had at home, but which he'd heard could be found in France. For my nephew Drew's first trip abroad, I'd offered him three choices: England, France, or Italy. He immediately eliminated England. "Not foreign enough," he said. But he took his time deciding between France and Italy, making a list for each country. While cuisine was not the only factor under consideration, it was central to his choice. The Italians, Drew concluded, use too much cheese in their cooking. And so a few months later we found ourselves boarding an Air France flight for Paris.

I'd been eleven, too, when I traveled to France for the first time, also my first trip overseas, but I didn't know what to expect. I was overwhelmed by the most normal of French gustatory experiences. In my little yellow travel diary, I passed quickly through the Louvre, paused briefly at the Pont du Gard, and barely noted the double walls of Carcassonne, but I carefully detailed each tart and puff purchased in a pastry shop, each bite of sole in butter, each breakfast of croissants and hot chocolate. But snails? Frog legs? Rabbit? I hadn't been that kind of eleven-year-old; I did not have a taste for anything so sophisticated or out of the ordinary.

When we eat, three of the five senses join together to tell us whether we like what we are ingesting: taste and smell, of course, but also touch. The tongue's surface is covered with touch receptors as well as taste buds, and the texture and temperature of food play an important role in

the experience of eating: the tingling of chili peppers, the sliminess of stewed okra, the silkiness of a well-whisked hollandaise sauce, the cold rush of ice water. A cousin of mine lost her sense of taste after hitting her head during a fall on the steps of Philadelphia's art museum, and while she does not cook anything ambitious anymore—"I can't tell if I've made the dish properly," she says—when she goes out to eat, she orders from the menu according to preferred textures.

Bad head colds have led most of us to believe that we cannot taste foods without a working sense of smell, but modern controlled experiments have revealed that this is not true. Smell enhances taste and allows for more complex sensations, but the two are separable and even rely on different parts of the brain: Neurotransmitters traveling from taste buds head for the cortex, while the limbic system is the destination of those from the nasal passages. When the sense of smell is eliminated, four basic taste types can still be identified by subjects in experiments: our old friends sweet, salt, sour, and bitter.

Some current researchers make the case for metallic, alkaline, and savory taste types, too, but there is not yet agreement on these.¹ Even if there are two or three more, the total number would still fall short of the nine basic tastes accepted in sixteenth-century Europe: sweet, sour, sharp, pungent, harsh, fatty, bitter, insipid, and salty. In the eighteenth century, the Swedish naturalist and physician Linnaeus added astringent, viscous, aqueous, and nauseous, while omitting pungent and harsh, and the Swiss scientist Albrecht von Haller dropped fatty but added to the original nine spirituous, aromatic, urinous, and putrid.²

¹Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 76.

²Ibid.

Another fall in the family—this time my brother’s mother-in-law, in a hotel room in Rome—makes the case for a sense of taste even in the absence of a sense of smell. Carol’s head injury left her without olfaction, but she can still identify the flavors of food. Her only concern is that she will miss the gas leak from the stove on which she prepared it.

Those taste buds that can identify sweet, salt, sour, and bitter all by themselves are actually clusters of taste receptor cells. The number of taste buds can vary dramatically from person to person, as can the number of receptors from bud to bud, and the number of receptors declines with age, all of which results in individuals whose sense of taste is more, or less, acute. The great French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, writing in the early nineteenth century, did not have the benefit of today’s scientific knowledge, yet he knew enough to accurately identify the basic reason for physiological differences in taste:

We have already seen how the sensation of taste is principally situated in the tentacles of the tongue. Now, anatomy teaches that all tongues are not equally provided with these tentacles; that one tongue may possess thrice as many as another. This circumstance explains how it is that of two guests seated at the same table, one displays signs of the liveliest pleasure, while the other seems only to be eating under constraint; the reason is, that the second guest has a scantily equipped tongue, and that the empire of taste has also its blind and deaf subjects.³

As Carolyn Korsmeyer, a contemporary taste researcher, has pointed out, however, there are ways to compensate for poor vision or poor hearing—glasses, contacts, hearing aids, even optic

³Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, trans. Arthur Machen (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), p. 24. Now considered one of the classic books on taste and food, *The Physiology of Taste* was originally published in France in 1825, and to read it is to sit down to a long, wonderful meal with the wittiest and most charming of dinner companions.

and aural surgeries—yet no one has yet figured out (or perhaps bothered to consider) how to improve the sense of taste in those who are deficient.⁴ In fact, the medical community would probably find it difficult to agree on a standard of taste normalcy, since sociocultural factors play such a strong role in shaping the sense of taste, even more than physiological or genetic factors. There does not appear to be such a thing as 20/20 taste.



That first evening in Paris with Drew, I asked the concierge of our small Left Bank hotel to recommend someplace nearby for dinner, and he sent us down the street to a brasserie. It was nine o'clock, most of the tables were full, and the maitre d' knew instantly we were American tourists. With nowhere else to put a twosome, he seated Drew and me next to an elegant middle-aged Parisian couple, both of whom eyed us warily as we began discussing the menu. When Drew's plate of escargots arrived, it was clear from their faces that they thought he had made a mistake ordering. Drew picked up the accompanying small clamp, somewhat uncertain how to handle it, and seized the first shell.

Now Paris isn't off the beaten track, and snails in garlic butter aren't *that* exotic, but for a young American, they are hardly normal fare. Growing up in suburban New Jersey, Drew had never actually seen anyone eat escargots. Humans may be omnivores, but as children our tastes tend toward what is served at the family table, which usually is not very different from what is being

⁴Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, p. 89.

served at all the family tables in the neighborhood. That disdainful couple in the brasserie might not have been so surprised to see Drew eating snails if he was a French child, but an American boy . . . *mon Dieu!* It is to Drew's credit that only one shell hit the floor that evening, and none landed on our neighbors' table.

We read with fascination and sometimes revulsion about what people in other cultures eat, or what they ate in ages past: The Masai in Africa drink cow's blood; twelfth-century Hindu courtiers considered roast black rat a delicacy; and I suppose they would be appalled that we eat foods with ingredients like monocalcium phosphate, dimethylpolysiloxene, and tertiary butylhydroquinone—all completely synthetic compounds found in the hugely popular Chicken McNugget.

There are many reasons people eat what they do. In a book more poetic than scientific, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman explores some of them in the chapter on taste. Along with many scholars and scientists, she believes there is a nutritional explanation behind certain food choices, whether for an entire culture or just an individual. Those egg-shaped balls of clay eaten in some villages in Ghana? Apparently they are rich in potassium, magnesium, zinc, copper, calcium, iron, and other minerals necessary for human metabolic processes. A pregnant woman's craving for ice cream and other dairy products? Simply an instant message from her body that calcium is in short supply.⁵

But Ms. Ackerman seems most interested in the role that psychology can play in the development of a taste for particular foods. She details the increasingly bizarre and complex

⁵Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 150.

dishes of Roman bacchanals in the late Empire and decides that they were a debauched and bored aristocracy's attempt to spark a sensory flame.⁶ Then to present-day Japan, where the eating of potentially deadly fugu, or puffer fish, is the thrill-seeker's ride to the edge of the edible cliff. The skin and organs of fugu contain a neurological poison that must be removed by an extremely skilled chef during preparation, since just the tiniest amount of it can kill. Gourmands pay high prices to brush so close to death, and every year there are some who pay the ultimate price.⁷ At the end of the chapter, Ms. Ackerman concludes that it is through taste that we sublimate our guilt at having to "kill to live,"⁸ by which point she has quashed the appetite of most readers.

A rationale for food choices not covered sufficiently by mainstream food writers is necessity. Today in the United States and other developed countries, where most of us no longer produce food but purchase it (often already prepared), it is being left to economists and policy analysts to explore the relationship between what we earn and what we eat. "Household Food Expenditure Patterns: A Cluster Analysis" appeared in the April 2007 edition of the *Monthly Labor Review*.⁹ While not nearly as much fun to read as *A Natural History of the Senses*, the article makes the important point that in our society the "point of purchase" determines "the point of consumption." Using data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the authors perform a multivariate analysis to determine the correlations between a range of variables and the foods that Americans buy (and presumably eat). These variables

⁶Ibid., pp. 143–46.

⁷Ibid., pp. 167–71.

⁸Ibid., p. 172.

⁹Jessie X. Fan et al., "Household Food Expenditure Patterns: A Cluster Analysis," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (April 2007): 38–51.

include age, race, education, employment, gender, family composition, geographic location, and income.

The findings reveal that only 29 percent of U.S. households are buying foods that constitute a balanced diet. Most interestingly, full-time employment is one of the biggest risk factors for eating badly: Because time is in short supply, families with at least one full-time worker more frequently eat at full-service and fast-food restaurants, both of which are associated with poorer nutritional content and higher caloric intake. And it doesn't matter if you are making a lot of money: That means only that you are more likely to eat sitting down in the restaurant than driving through. But ultimately the health effects are the same: obesity, high cholesterol, diabetes, and other diet-related illnesses. In our fast-moving culture, lack of time necessitates unhealthy food choices more than lack of money.



There has been a hierarchy of the senses since the beginning of Western philosophy.¹⁰ Plato put vision at the top of the hierarchy and taste at the bottom. With vision, the object of sensation—what is seen—always remains outside the body. With taste, the object of sensation must be taken into the body to be experienced. Always concerned with the conflict between body and soul, Plato believed that, when it comes to the senses, the distance between body and object is a

¹⁰For this discussion of the sense hierarchy, I am indebted to Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*.

good thing, allowing for rational consideration of the real world and ultimately transcendence to a vision of the ideal. In one of his dialogues, he wrote:

Sight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars and the sun and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years have created number and have given us a conception of time, and the power of inquiring about the nature of the universe. And from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal men.¹¹

Taste, in contrast, leads perception inward to personal bodily pleasure and, if overindulged, can overwhelm rationality:

The authors of our race were aware that we should be intemperate in eating and drinking and take a good deal more than was necessary or proper, by reason of gluttony . . . making the whole race an enemy to philosophy and culture, and rebellious against the divinest element within us.¹²

Like Plato, Aristotle ranked taste low, and centuries of philosophers followed in their footsteps.

KANT: [Sight, hearing, and touch are] more objective than subjective, that is, they contribute . . . more to the cognition of the exterior object, than they arouse the consciousness of the affected organ. [Taste and smell], however, are more

¹¹Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 47a–b.

¹²Ibid., 72e–73a.

subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object.¹³

BURKE: *Smells*, and *Tastes*, have some share too, in ideas of greatness; but it is a small one, weak in its nature, and confined in its operations. I shall only observe, that no smells or tastes can produce a grand sensation, except excessive bitters, and intolerable stench.¹⁴

HEGEL: The sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste, and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art. For smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities. . . . For this reason these senses cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow of no *purely* sensuous relationship.¹⁵

Given the philosophers' low regard for the physiologic sense of taste, it is curious that by the Enlightenment, the word *taste* had become firmly entrenched, even in philosophical discourse, as the metaphor for discerning aesthetic judgment.

Clearly these men did not spend much time around babies and toddlers or they would have realized that the sense of taste can lead to more than subjective bodily sensations. In the beginning, in infancy, eating is about sustenance and security and, yes, pleasure, and it is also an act of exploration. One of the primary ways we begin to learn about ourselves and the world

¹³Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 41.

¹⁴Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 85.

¹⁵G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 1:38–39.

around us is by putting things in our mouths. A fist or foot. The edge of a blanket. The cat's tail.

Moving through childhood, we figure out what to put in our mouths and what to leave on the floor, and our taste narrows accordingly as we settle into a routine menu at school and home. At that point, taste usually does become habitual and unreflective: We tend to eat what we know, and moreover, what we know we already like. Yet there are some people, like Drew, who continue to try different foods, and though they may be Ms. Ackerman's nutritional deficient, desensitized aristocrats, death-defying gourmands, and guilt-ridden omnivores, none of those negative profiles fits my nephew. Drew's most defining characteristic is a desire to learn, and during our trip he was planning to learn about France by eating like the French.

That first dinner in Paris was followed by ten days of equally inquisitive eating. There was home-smoked salmon wrapped around crab meat and mayonnaise and topped with caviar at a château in the Loire. A farm-fresh omelette and green salad in a small village on the way to Mont St-Michel. And steamed mussels in white wine on a lunch break while exploring the D-Day beaches. Drew finally got his rabbit at the same Bayeaux inn where I had stayed thirty years earlier with my family, and when we returned the rental car, there was a thick layer of crumbs covering the back seat, where Drew had made his nest during our drives. We never did get a menu with frog legs, something of a disappointment for Drew. And he did not like the tannic bite of wine, nor cheeses covered with mold and ash. Being eleven, he preferred the cleaner-looking varieties.

Drew is now almost eighteen, and he has found how easy it is to keep adding to his list of foods to track down and try, with New York City just outside his front door. Of the five senses, taste is still his primary mode of perception, the one he uses not just to take in the world, but to go out into it. He is the Christopher Columbus, the Vasco da Gama, the Magellan of eating. He does not overeat or indulge in gluttony, but approaches food with deliberateness, curiosity, and thoughtfulness. Condemn him not, Plato. Through taste, it is possible to explore the nature of the universe.