Taste is notoriously untrustworthy. Of the five senses familiar to the modern West, none raises so many uncertainties, and none makes such claims of significance. Every assertion that there is no accounting for taste brings into play not only all the senses but also the self. To order the confusion of experience, against all odds, all kinds of people spend a good deal of time accounting for taste—describing the indescribable, measuring the immeasurable, generalizing the singular. The Latin adage de gustibus non est disputandum turns out to be dead wrong. Almost everyone argues about taste every day (Über Geschmack lässt sich nicht streiten), proof positive that no one has a singular taste (chacun à son goût) or regards all tastes as equivalent (tutti gusti sono giusti).

The distinctive character of taste, its connections to the other senses, and the vicissitudes of distinct tastes engage the philosopher, the natural scientist, the historian, the social scientist, the poet. That such accountings have become increasingly prominent over recent decades says a lot about contemporary sophistication about matters of taste, notably in those contemporary cultures blessed by abundance. Having tasted far and wide, the postmodern palate has great expectations. So too the postmodern intellectual. Just as an ever broader range of tastings alters the sense of taste, ever more frequent forays—tastings, if you will—into different disciplines open new prospects on the ways taste works and what it means.

Taste, arguably, is the most singular of all the senses, and tasting makes the most private of connections to the material world. The tasting subject requires heightened intimacy with a taste object defined by corporeality and ephemerality. Largely as a consequence of these qualifications, the hierarchy of the senses traditionally places taste in the company of touch and smell, well below the much less aggressively sensual faculties of sight and hearing.

The egoism of taste raises yet another barrier to sharing particular tastes and most certainly lies behind the general uneasiness about the disconcerting ephemerality of taste objects. In the strictest sense, because no one can taste the same material good as someone else, tastes cannot be shared. Yet every society devises means to contain the centrifugal forces of multiple tastes. Every culture works to counter the physiological singularity of food. Most do so through three social prac-
tices: samplings that extrapolate from the tasting of a dish; language that communicates tastes; and a focus on the common gustatory space of the meal.

However private an act, food in society is consumed synecdochically—that is, part of the dish is taken for the whole. Individuals and collectivities routinely designate proxies, who range from the official taster whose continued well-being reassures the monarch that a dish is not poisoned to the vigilant spouse whose tasting stands as guarantor that a given food will not set off an allergic reaction. And what is food criticism but language in the service of sampling? What are meals but sites for communicating these samplings?

The same tastes that set the individual apart also bring people together. Indeed, without shared tastes, no meal could be served. Although as a species we share a taste for sugar and a distaste for bitter flavors, actual likes and dislikes largely reflect different cultures and milieus. Humans are omnivores; individuals and peoples are not. No society consumes more than a fraction of available edibles. Not simply a pleasure or even a possibility for the omnivore, choice is an obligation. The choices made among taste objects, as a consequence, constitute exceptionally instructive cultural markers.

Unicity sets taste apart from the other senses that work from a sensory object that exists more or less stably outside the individual. However divergent the interpretations of the sensory experience, the same sight is there for others to see, the same sound to hear, the same scent to smell, the same object to touch. Not so for food—the consummate taste object that is unavoidably destroyed by consumption and changes even if it is not consumed.

At the same time, even though taste stands largely apart from the other senses, it is conspicuously dependent upon those senses. As much research has demonstrated and common experience corroborates, it is virtually impossible to separate the taste of an object from the more comprehensive sensory experience of which it is a part and to which it contributes. Taste is inextricable from the other transparently corporeal senses. Smell makes taste possible, and touch, or in tasting terms texture, intensifies, and therefore completes, any tasting. Sight and even hearing also enter into the taste experience. If taste rarely impinges on sight or hearing, every cook knows full well how much seeing and hearing have to do with what and how we taste. How often do we exclaim, “It looks soooo good” or recoil before a dish with an

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1 I owe this provocative observation to Mark Jenner.
2 This dilemma has been explored most recently by Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, 2006). Pollan explicitly draws upon the pioneering work of the psychologist Paul Rozin. See his summary of his research, “Why We Eat What We Eat, and Why We Worry about It,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 50, no. 5 (1997): 26–48.
4 See especially the articles in this forum on smell and touch: Mark S. R. Jenner, “Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories,” and Elizabeth D. Harvey, “The Portal of Touch.” Simple objects such as spices and essences come the closest to single flavors, but these products change over time, if more slowly than foodstuffs. The degree of complexity varies, but a single fruit or vegetable, tasted in isolation, reveals a range of flavors. In any case, most of our tasting as humans deals with complex objects, that is, foods that combine several ingredients or elements. See the discussion of molecular gastronomy below. On the taste changes effected by spices in conceptions of the world, see Paul Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 2008); and Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (Berkeley, Calif., 2008).
emphatic “Yuck”?5 Every chef knows the crucial role that plating—the arrangement of food on the plate—plays in a restaurant’s success. As for hearing, think of how important audible crunchiness is to the experience of certain foods, from celery and breakfast cereals (“Snap, Crackle, and Pop”) to popcorn and apples.

Like all the senses, taste mediates relationships to the material world. Given the proximity to things required for sensory contact, each sense must contend with the limitations imposed by space. Modern means of reproduction may mitigate these constraints. Yet, as Walter Benjamin argued for the visual arts, the loss of physical connection with the art object challenges the legitimacy of the experience. The new object created by reproduction—say, a photograph—redefines the sensory act.6 Reproduction of material offered for tasting is of a still different order. The most that any cook can hope for is consistency in presentation—no dish will ever be identical to prior preparations, no matter how scrupulously a recipe is followed or conditions replicated. Even a system as vigilant as McDonald’s cannot fully rationalize the preparation of foodstuffs.7

As the taste object varies from one occasion to another, so too tasters change from one meal to the next, even from one mouthful to the next (one reason for the prescribed order in the tasting of wines). A second aspect of the spatial parameters of taste concerns material limitation. To be sure, all sensory experience is contextual, but taste tends to be exceptionally constricted. Take the connection often made between taste and place, or what the French have long called (and Americans are coming to call) terroir. As early as the sixteenth century, products such as wine and wheat were deemed to carry the taste of the soil in which they were grown. The closer the connection of taste to place, the less generalizable the taste experience.8

Because it requires the literal incorporation of the object consumed, taste is the most intimate of the senses. You are indeed what you eat. Willy-nilly, in the strict physiological sense of the term, the human body incorporates the food consumed. On special, infrequent occasions, the taste act may remain incomplete, the better to keep body or judgment intact, unaffected by the material substance that would ordinarily be ingested. This principle of detachment governs professional tastings, where food, or more typically wine, is appraised, though rarely consumed. One effect of the separation of tasting from consumption and the bodily process of which it is the first stage is the “decorporealization” of the corporeal—a true contradiction in

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5 This point is made emphatically by William Ian Miller, “The Senses,” in Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 60–88. Miller usefully distinguishes between distaste, which concerns the sensory, and disgust, which is ideational, although as he demonstrates, the two often act in tandem.


8 Thanks to Kyri Watson Claflin for pointing me to Charles Estienne’s work in the sixteenth century. Amy Trubek shows how the debates about terroir have moved from France to the U.S.; Trubek, The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir (Berkeley, Calif., 2008).
terms. Because this severance contravenes the physiological function of food as nourishment, it is scarcely surprising that these tastings in isolation should commonly be criticized as “unnatural.”

The transformations and contingencies of the sensory object intensify the ephemerality of the taste experience and undermine its credibility as a source of knowledge. Contrary to those senses in which the sensory object exists more or less independently of the individual, the incorporation of the taste object utterly transforms its substance. Mastication is the visible sign, digestion the invisible (if occasionally audible) sign of the process that breaks down foods into components assimilable by the body and eliminates those that the body rejects. From ingestion to defecation, eating classifies tasting as a corporeal function, thereby obliterating, or at the very least obscuring, the act of discrimination.

From mastication and swallowing to heartburn and beyond, the corporeality of eating daily reminds us humans of our status as animals and our subjection to the imperative dictates of the body. The inescapable connection with the body and functions that modern societies have come to see as shameful reinforces the lowly placement of taste in the hierarchy of the senses of the Western philosophical tradition.9 The primacy accorded reason as a defining feature of humans, along with the corresponding distrust of the body as a source of knowledge, and the consequent depreciation of taste, touch, and smell, follows the body itself: the farther from the head, the presumed seat of reason, and the closer to the appetites, the less esteemed and the less “noble” the sense. Association with the intellectual knowledge of reality elevates sight and hearing. Although taste starts out in a favored location, its sites then descend, philosophically no less than physiologically, into the nether regions. Food is most certainly non-heroic and is often used to great comic effect. It is not surprising that so many literary works interpret food, tasting, and eating as comic—no tragic hero eats unless poison is at work. Nor do gods eat (nectar and ambrosia hardly count).10

Though present, the physicality of sensory practice is far less apparent for sight and hearing than for touch, smell, and taste. At least from the Book of Genesis, a vast number of works have conflated knowledge, light, and power.11 The power to

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10 See Jocelyne Kolb, The Ambiguity of Taste: Freedom and Food in European Romanticism (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995), 1–24. As Korsmeyer notes, ordinary still lifes, and particularly those of food (depictions of the Last Supper apart), were judged inferior to “major” productions such as history paintings; Making Sense of Taste, 156–161.

11 The sociologist Georg Simmel considers the senses in terms of the interactions that they prompt, though he, too, accepts the conventional ordering with the eye and the ear as the major senses. Because the face is the site of a “specifically sociological type of ‘knowing,’” the lower senses, deprived of this location, are necessarily of secondary importance. Of these, Simmel discusses only smell, which remains “captive in the human subject” and therefore unreliable as a source of social interaction. Simmel, “Sociology of the Senses,” trans. Mark Ritter and David Frisy, in David Frisy and Mike Featherstone, eds., Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings (London, 1997), 109–120, quotations from 113 and 118. Insofar as taste is still more captive and still more tied to the subject, its social significance emerges only in or through its socialized form, the meal. Accordingly, Simmel considered the meal to be the proper sociological subject. Simmel, “Sociology of the Meal,” ibid., 130–135.
see and hear bestows the omnipotence of divinity and ensures control of both self and the Other. By contrast, the stronger the directives of taste, the less power accrues to the individual. Perceived as victims of their appetites, those defined by taste are seen as having abdicated command of self and surroundings. Addiction betrays the vulnerability of the body, and unrestrained indulgence offers incontrovertible evidence of an absence of self-control. Understandably, gluttony is reproved, if not condemned outright. That the Church included it among the so-called Seven Deadly Sins points to the urgency of controlling the appetites.12

By the same token, the heightened corporeality of tasting, ingestion, digestion, and defecation exposes the close relationship of taste to the self. Gatekeepers to the body, tastes guard bodily integrity. They warn us of possible harmful consequences of ingestion even as they anticipate the potential pleasures of sensory fulfillment. Such is the physiological basis for the belief ingrained in Western culture that taste is ours and ours alone. Taste is integral to identity because what humans taste becomes them in the most vital sense. But what if the food in question proves stronger than the self? It is not surprising to find heightened anxiety about such corporeal “invasion” among those with food allergies or who follow religious or other interdictions.

Yet the contact with the Other afforded by food may also invite a joyful communion that reaches to the spiritual. In the Confessions, for one striking example, Augustine invariably relies on the terrestrial to reach the divine. Far from renouncing the senses, time and again Augustine draws on them to raise himself above mere sensual pleasure. Longingly, with Ambrose in Milan, he sees “what delicious joys came as he fed on and digested your [God’s] bread.” Or again, God asserts his strength: “I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.”13

Sensuality has traditionally figured mystical union with the godhead, an allegorization or metaphorization that resolutely decorporealizes the sense experience. Contrary to the dynamic of carnal relationships, satisfaction of spiritual appetite does not lessen the desire for divine nourishment.14 Yet, in his insistence on the imagery of nourishment along with the constant invocation of known earthly de-

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12 The other six sins are avarice, anger, envy, pride, lust, and sloth. The seven sins were codified in the sixth century as deadly or, as French has it, “capital” sins, since these dispositions (rather than acts) were at “the head of,” and therefore responsible for, a multiplicity of sinful acts (anger, for example, leading to murder). Still, although the great classifier of sins, Dante, consigns gluttons to Hell, they are only in the Third Circle (of Nine), just below the lustful in the Second. On the nineteenth-century French reconstruction of gluttony (gourmandise), see Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine (Chicago, 2004), 91–92, 100–101. See, more generally, Florent Quellier, Gourmandise: Histoire d’un péché capital (Paris, 2010).

13 The two preceding quotations are from Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1998), bk. 6, 3, 3 (p. 92); bk. 7, 10, 16 (p. 124). Cf. “Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God—a light, voice, odor, food, embrace of my inner man . . . where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God”; bk. 10, 6, 8 (p. 183). A crucial step in the development of a modern culinary sensibility in the Renaissance is the redirection of this sensuality back to the body in writers such as Bartolomeo Platina in De honesta voluptate et valetudine (On Honorable Pleasure and Health) (1465). Cookbooks also count as corporeal celebratory texts.

14 On the significance of fasting as an expression of religious zeal and personal autonomy by medieval
lights, Augustine, like so many others, incessantly appeals to the familiar foundation of taste. Paradoxically but emphatically, humans accede to the divine through the terrestrial, the material, and the social.

**Given the distinctive malleability** of taste, the social context of tasting decisively shapes the taste experience. As a reaction against this variability and the indeterminacy of taste stand the many efforts to specify, and even to standardize, taste, which requires reconfiguring taste as a singular object. Although the movement to stabilize the unstable did not originate in the eighteenth century, it was then that the redefinition of taste emerged as a major feature of scientific and aesthetic discourse. From a sensory experience accessible to every human being, taste came to be understood hierarchically, as the attribute of a favored few in a specific time and place.

No other sense had its very raison d’être so transformed. For one, the rehabilitation of this most depreciated of the senses removed it from the realm of sensory experience altogether. By dissociating taste from bodily functions and associating it instead with reason and refinement, the eighteenth century shifted the site of taste from the body to the mind.\(^\text{15}\) No longer was it a question of sampling or tasting a particular substance. The dominant construction of taste turned on preferences, on an innate taste or inclination for something. In contrast to the spiritualization of Augustine and the mystics, who revered the body as both a locus of great and wonderful experience and a source of knowledge, intellectualization and aestheticization repudiated the sensory. Curiously enough, neither phenomenon put an end to the inherent association of taste and self. If anything, the connection intensified. Taste continued to adhere to the self, but thereafter as a quality that set the individual apart.

The spread of the printing press greatly facilitated the translation of the elusive taste experience into an analyzable phenomenon. By stabilizing the ephemeral, printing facilitated comparisons and criticisms of texts. Equally important, it gave relatively broad access to genres that afforded access to the history of taste. Although neither the cookbook nor the dietary treatise records actual taste practices, together they supply templates for ascertaining the foods, and therefore the tastes, that were possible, and preferred, at a given time and place. In valorizing some tastes, disparaging or simply ignoring others, cookbooks and dietary treatises articulate values and legitimate the very production of taste. Little conveys the fundamental “otherness” of the medieval world more strikingly than food preferences so different from our own “tastescape.” Several centuries elapsed before delicate herbs replaced

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\(^{15}\) Debates over taste absorbed the eighteenth century, notably in England and France. Edmund Burke is a key figure in this process of aestheticization and intellectualization: “I mean by the word Taste no more than that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which are affected with, or which form a judgment of, the works of imagination and the elegant arts.” Burke, *On Taste: Introductory Discourse*, in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 5th ed. (London, 1767), 6. See the discussion in Denise Gigante, “The Century of Taste: Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke,” in Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, Conn., 2005), 47–67.
heavy spices and freshly slaughtered beef took over in the kitchen from meat left to hang for weeks.16

Prompted by the need to satisfy elite consumers, cookbooks came to apply science to the problems of production. As cooking techniques became more sophisticated, professional culinary writers became more insistent upon the precision of the dishes they produced. Marie-Antoine Carême, the greatest chef of the nineteenth century, made a special point of examining the components of dishes in the “spirit of analysis of the nineteenth century,” and it is this analytic frame that justifies Carême’s reputation as the founder of modern French cuisine.17 L’Art de la cuisine française au dix-neuvième siècle (1833) begins with a discussion of pot-au-feu (boiled beef), the dish that holds the key to the French worker’s diet and also lays the foundation for French cuisine as a whole. The bouillon from the beef turns up as a basic ingredient in many of the soups and sauces that Carême claims as distinctively French culinary triumphs.

Surely it is testimony to Carême’s modernity that this work begins not with a recipe but with an analysis that details exactly what happens when the housewife sets her pot on the fire and produces the savory beef broth that makes this dish one of the glories of French cuisine. Carême singles out the “osmazome,” the meat essence that was considered at the time to give bouillon and soups their distinctive odor and succulence. Scientific knowledge based in empirical observation had come to the culinary arts. The point is not whether this science was correct—the term “osmazome” is today classified as “obsolete”—but that a working chef sought to secure his authority by calling upon the resources of science.

The reasoned presentation that increasingly professionalized chefs over the nineteenth century struggled to achieve for the production of taste, gastronomes strove to realize for consumption. Gastronomy—from gastro + nomos, the “laws of the stomach”—entered the cultural lexicon. The gastronome’s motto could well be one of the aphorisms that open the Physiologie du goût (1826) of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin: “animals feed, people eat, intelligent people alone know how to eat.” Well ahead of his time, Brillat laid out a science of consumption. The Physiologie du goût claims to investigate taste scientifically, both as a physiological phenomenon and as a central element of the social order.18

Good Enlightenment philosophe that he was, Brillat opens the Physiologie with

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16 See in particular Stephen Mennell, All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present (Oxford, 1985); and Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, Savoring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1789 (Philadelphia, 1983); and for medieval culinary research, see Bruno Laurioux, Manger au Moyen Âge: Pratiques et discours alimentaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles (Paris, 2005). Freedman, Out of the East, emphasizes how very differently spices were thought to mediate our relationships to food in the Middle Ages.


a disquisition on the six senses traditionally recognized by Western culture (he adds physical desire to the standard five) and then focuses on the physiology of his chosen sense. As an “amateur doctor,” the essayist (and former magistrate) considers digestion, diet, nutrition, and obesity along with the composition of foods. Yet he says less about food than about dining, less about appetite than about sociability. The mixture of the two shows the Physiologie as an exemplary transitional text from the scientific and especially medical model of taste so prominent in the eighteenth century to the sociological or ethnographic mode that emerged in the nineteenth century.19

Despite the title of the work, Brillat’s most pressing concern is not the physiology of taste but its social practice. Gastronomy, or what he also calls “social gourmandise,” should concern every reader because it connects individual taste to social context. Brillat argues that gastronomy fosters the sociability that he views as crucial to the social order and to social health. More influential in society than the pleasure of eating—the immediate, direct satisfaction of hunger—is the reflective, communal pleasure at table. The social drama of the meal engages Brillat because it orders and disciplines our pleasures. The very particular pleasure at table, in his understanding, creates a world apart, a utopia of everyday life that welcomes all who work at it.20 These adventures at table recounted with his customary geniality brought the Physiologie du goût immediate acclaim and lasting popularity among readers who very likely skip the scientific chapters.

Tribute to Brillat’s scientific acumen comes from an unexpected corner in the approach to consumption. The chemist Hervé This, the foremost exponent of “molecular gastronomy,” takes his inspiration from Brillat and judges the Physiologie du goût as a model for research in the worlds of taste.21 The modern scientist rehabilitates the scientific works of his predecessor even as he criticizes his assertions. Like Brillat, This is concerned with cooking as a means to the gastronomic end. A chemist by training, he focuses on tastes and flavors—how they are produced, how they are perceived, where they are located. Looking to expand the contemporary tastescape, This applauds the addition of the earthy or savory taste that the Japanese recognize as umami to the conventional spectrum of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter.
He takes cheer in research that specifies not one but five categories of bitterness, and celebrates the discovery of distinct tastes for metal and for cold, along with the promotion of licorice to the status of an independent flavor. He notes as well that while salt is a foundational taste, because it is a prime flavor enhancer, it is also a powerful agent of transformation for other flavors.

These efforts at scientific precision notwithstanding, the public at large is little the wiser, and is often driven to flights of fancy or pedestrian prose to convey the taste experience. The lability of tastes and their constant mutation according to texture, temperature, and associated flavors have a great deal to do with the much-lamented imprecision of the language of taste. If food discussions are rife with comparisons, it is because the usable, that is, non-technical, terminology for flavors is so limited. A taste is usually compared, timidly, to a known substance: some new thing “tastes like” some known food. Metaphor pushes the connection further. Take the wonderfully apposite example from the Disney/Pixar film Ratatouille (2007). The explosive results of an unusual cooking method (cheese and mushrooms struck by lightning) must be rendered visually and aurally, because the only expression that one of the tasters can come up with is “lightning-y.”

Like cooking itself, metaphors are transformative. Is the cook a magician or a technician? The status of cooking has been debated for centuries: does it enhance taste or denature it? Already in the third century, Athenaeus cites a chef’s boast of preparing a turnip to taste like an anchovy, and the prospect of culinary trickery has attracted critics as well as practitioners ever since. For the great compendium of the Enlightenment, the Encyclopédie (1751–1780), culinary “experiments in sensuality” turned foods into “flattering poisons.” The debate all but consumed the eighteenth century, since the possibility of culinary tricks, even downright fraud, undermined all claims for the reliability of sensory knowledge. Today, as consumers insist that cuisine means that things taste like what they are, deceiving taste would seem to have gone out of style. Even so, it is well not to overlook the many confectons, from bridal cakes to chocolate statuettes, that seek to surprise, if not delude, the eye.

A number of contemporary American chefs have hit upon the great resource that umami represents in expanding the contemporary tastescape by expanding our taste vocabulary and concepts. The introduction of umami should make it clear that this discussion is concerned with taste as it has been produced and used in the West. For examination of other sensory orders, see Classen, Worlds of Sense.

Mark M. Smith makes a point of citing non-Western examples for all of the senses; Smith, Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History (Berkeley, Calif., 2007); on taste, see 75–91. For a taste of other culinary systems, see Joanna Waley-Cohen, “The Quest for Perfect Balance: Taste and Gastronomy in Imperial China,” in Paul Freedman, ed., Food: The History of Taste (Berkeley, Calif., 2008), 99–132; and a number of the essays in Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, eds., Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present (New York, 1999), a somewhat abridged translation of Histoire de l'alimentation (Paris, 1996).

And when Nicomedes had tasted the turnip, he sang the praise of anchovy to his friends.” Athenaeus concludes with an even greater boast: “The cook and the poet are just alike: the art of each lies in his brain.” The Deipnosophists of Athenaeus of Naucratis, trans. C. B. Gulick, 7 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1: 33. In the Gorgias, Plato has Socrates make a similar connection (cooking and rhetoric as practices of flattery) in a negative judgment that has supplied ammunition to the detractors of cuisine ever since. Gorgias, trans. Benjamin Jowett, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1672/1672-h/1672h.htm #2H_4_0002.

Fear of food is omnipresent. Among other examples, see Ken Albala, Eating Right in the Renaissance (Berkeley, Calif., 2002); and Madeleine Ferrières, Sacred Cow, Mad Cow: A History of Food Fears, trans. Jody Gladding (New York, 2006).
THE FAILURE OF SCIENTIFIC ANALYSES to help ordinary mortals make sense of their
taste experiences opens the way for the more profound translation of the material
into something else. Metaphor connects dissimilar objects—mushrooms, cheese, and
lightning in *Ratatouille*. It asserts not simply that one thing is *like* another, but that
this thing *is* the other. By associating tastes with radically different phenomena,
metaphorization turns tastes into something else. From a corporeal attribute, taste
is redefined as an instrument of aesthetic sensitivity and intellectual discernment.

Driven by appreciation of beauty, the discussions of taste that turned on aesthetic
and intellectual elements consistently denigrated the physiological and material
components. Rather than a feature of a given sense object, taste was, as it still is,
taken as a characteristic of individuals. Aesthetic sublimation canceled out the appetites. By translating the lower or lesser sense into a different, and usually higher,
idiom, metaphorization disembodied taste. From the least of the senses, taste be-
came the arbiter of all of them.

It became an arbiter, too, in the social hierarchy. For, whether innate or acquired,
taste—which could signify only “good taste”—was taken to mark the superiority of
the individual and of the relevant group or “taste public,” that is, cultural consumers
joined by their common preference for a given cultural product. This modern con-
ception of taste as a marker of social difference is strongly indebted to Enlighten-
ment aestheticization. The paradox shows up most sharply in the social setting of
the meal. Instead of bringing people together, as Georg Simmel observed, the need for
nourishment that connects all beings ends up setting them against one another. In
resolute contrast to Brillat’s stress on the sociability of dining that fosters equality,
Simmel reads the meal as a prime site for the production of inequality.

Is this hegemonic standard innate, or can it be acquired? For some, taste is in-
herent. Some individuals “naturally” have taste; others do not, and it cannot be
acquired. And yet, from etiquette manuals to cookbooks, a flood of publications have
long offered just this kind of instruction. Some aspects of taste, it would seem, can
indeed be taught, and there was no shortage of “taste tutors” to offer instruction.
Prominent among these cultural commentators, A. B. L. Grimod de la Reynière

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25 See Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 38–67. Similar dichotomies muddle our understandings of
other senses: sight-sights, hearing-sounds, smell-smells, touch-touches. Technical vocabulary does little
to mitigate the confusion (vision, audition, gustation, olfaction, haptic/hapticity).

26 Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York,
1999). Gans, however, writes against the conception of aesthetic taste; he proposes “taste public” as a
neutral term that carries none of the freight of valuation bestowed by the aesthetic construction of taste.

27 Simmel, “Sociology of the Meal,” 130–135. Such public hierarchization became a staple of literary
works. The nineteenth-century social novel in England and France (Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray,
Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola) is notable for the ways it uses meals to dramatize social distance. On
the larger literary context and in particular the Romantic sense of taste, see Gigante, *Taste*.

28 Their motto might well be Molière’s characterization of “people of quality” as the favored few who
“know everything without ever having learned anything” (“Les gens de qualité savent tout sans avoir
jamais rien appris”); Molière, *Les Précieuses ridicules* (1658), scene 10. The play is dedicated to the
proposition that good taste cannot be acquired. Cf. Voltaire’s claim a century later about the immu-
habitability of (good) taste and the consequent hierarchization of society in his article “Goût,” in *En-
cyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1757): “Depraved taste in
foods is choosing foods that disgust others. It’s a kind of illness. Depraved taste in the Arts is liking
subjects that revolt proper minds [*esprits bien faits*] . . . it’s a mental illness.” Although material taste
admits no contradictions, “it is not the same for the Arts. Since they have real beauty, there is a good
taste that discerns them and a bad taste that does not.” Some countries have taste; others (Asian cultures,
for Voltaire) do not.
linked the material and the aesthetic conceptions of taste. In what stands as the first instance of culinary journalism, *L’Almanach des gourmands* (1803–1812) and the *Manuel des amphitryons* (1808), Grimod attended to the ignorance of wealthy post-revolutionary elites. They had, he was convinced, no notion of the savoir faire of the ancien régime. For Grimod, the knowledge indispensable to any elite worthy of the name included knowing how to host and how to dine, what to consume, what to serve and how to do so. Much like the contradictory views of “civilisation” that the French took as at once a superior condition attained by a few and a goal toward which all peoples should strive, taste represented both an achieved state and a work in progress.29

Internalized into the psyche and integrated into everyday social life, this worldly intelligence of taste determines how one acts and also how one thinks of oneself. For the individual as well as for others, this deployment of savoir faire expresses and produces the self. Yet, this supposedly inborn, “natural” mode of being turns out to be decidedly social. The contemporary sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contends that every distinctive way of inhabiting the world—the configuration of attitudes, behavior, and manners that he labels habitus—originates in the internalized values, standards, and customs of a given social milieu.30 Although Bourdieu draws on an extensive study of taste preferences in mid-twentieth-century France, the taste practices themselves are less important for his theory than his target, which is the notion of aestheticized taste itself. In a direct attack on Kant’s construction of taste as autonomous, disinterested, and divorced from the everyday, not only does Bourdieu locate taste in a specific social site, he also ties it to a social class whose interests a given taste necessarily serves. To understand how taste works in the social order, Bourdieu argues, it must be seen as an ideological genre whose function is to legitimate the bourgeoisie, its worldview, and its world.

Where the sociologist uses taste practices as an empirical means to a theoretical end, historians more commonly look to the practices of given taste communities. The questions asked of these communities range widely, but they all seek to position tastes in social, cultural, historical, economic, and political space. How do tastes connect individuals? Do they foster or express identity? How do they take hold? What are the historical, social, and economic origins of such preferences?31

Because taste is conceptually so slippery and empirically so elusive, its history

29 See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1: *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1994). Elias’s magisterial psychosocial analysis of Western culture from the Middle Ages proposes a privatization of bodily functions from eating to sexual intercourse and defecation, a control that Elias attributes to an enhanced awareness of others and a corresponding sense of one’s own space and its inviolability.


relies on surrogates, the most observable of which is food. Scholarly detectives follow tastes in the records of foods consumed and discussed.32 A first step, the recovery of ingredients no longer used, depends on the reconstruction of taste practices or what have come to be called foodways—the customs and values associated with the consumption of food in a particular setting.33 Of the many works that deal with foods over time, the most valuable move away from “when” and “what” to “why.” Making use of historical records, these studies work to sort out the complex relationships between foods, tastes, and their social settings.

What connects taste and identity? When did specific foods become associated with collectivities? Pasta of one kind or another is consumed almost the world over: when did it become so strongly identified with Italian foodways?34 How did America alter the foods and the foodways of immigrants?35 Migration affects the foods as well as the practices of consumption and the symbolic import of those practices. More generally, how and why do tastes travel? Which ones travel best? The confrontation of different food cultures sets up an ideal situation in which to follow the changes for both parties. The greater the initial differences, presumably the more dramatic the changes. At the same time, the host culture is always highly selective about what it incorporates into its foodways and what it continues to keep at a distance.36

Take the history of chocolate as it moved between the exotic and the familiar, the American and the European, the colonial and the imperial. It is a cautionary tale of importation, adaptation, and creation, of exportation, industrialization, and production. Introduced into Spain from its American colonies, chocolate was a new food for Europeans. Western consumers changed the product some, mitigating the bitter cacao taste with sugar instead of the honey favored by the Mexicans, but throughout

32 Even Sidney Mintz, who examines the penchant for sweetness, focuses on sugar as a vehicle for that taste; Mintz, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (New York, 1985). This classic study locates sugar in a complex social system of nascent empire and industrialization in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England.


35 Hasia R. Diner, Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration (Cambridge, Mass., 2002). Diner uses printed material and letters to trace the evolution of Italian-American foodways from the peasant foods and foodways in Italy to new foods and foodways in America. Indeed, given the decisive regional divisions in Italy itself, Diner claims the emergent Italian-American cuisine as the only truly Italian cuisine. See, for the later period, Simone Cinotto, “‘We Ate as a Family’: The Social Significance of Food in Italian Harlem, 1920–1940,” in R. Baritono et al., eds., Public and Private in American History: State, Family, Subjectivity in the Twentieth Century (Turin, 2003), 535–553. On the transformation of American dining, see Harvey Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America (New York, 1993); and Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet (New York, 1988).

36 See Brian Cowan, “New Worlds, New Tastes: Food Fashions after the Renaissance,” in Freedman, Food, 197–230. Cowan argues that early modern food culture was subjected to constant pressure to maintain continuity in the face of dramatic innovation (197).
the eighteenth century, chocolate remained an emissary of empire. Industrialization in the nineteenth century domesticated this product, which in its new guise as milk chocolate was aimed at a mass market. The artisanal “haut-chocolat” of today’s upscale market has brought further modifications with its emphasis on single-provenance cocoa beans and unusual flavors from anise and wasabi to myrtle and tonka bean. Chocolate and its discourse operate in a tastescape very different from the familiar one of only a few years ago.

Yet tastes remain elusive. Even in the entirely improbable event that a product were to remain rigorously the same, tasters change. We do not taste as our grandparents tasted. We cannot do so, so that even if we could reconstitute authentic meals from the past, we could not taste them authentically, that is, as they were tasted in the original context. The movement of peoples and the transport of products have enlarged taste horizons immeasurably. Foods unknown to earlier generations have formed our palates. To follow those adventures, to forge links between the individual and the social, we must make do with written records of production and consumption and with narratives of individual sense experiences. At one remove from the sense experience, these texts make that experience available to the rest of us.

There is no more telling example of this imbrication of individual taste and social space than Proust’s celebrated madeleine. Taste reaches into the recesses of memory to recover a past that takes the dejected narrator out of his self to another world altogether. His childhood comes to him one dreary November afternoon when he nibbles on the most famous cookie in literary history.

And, as soon as I recognized the taste of the madeleine . . . immediately the old gray house on the street . . . the Square, . . . the streets . . . the country paths . . . the people of the village . . . the church and all Combray and its surroundings . . . rose out of my cup of tea.

Proust does more than demonstrate the power of taste to revive the individual and resuscitate a long-buried past. He proposes a model for the historicity of taste.


38 Pierre Boisard, Camembert: A National Myth, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley, Calif., 2003). As Boisard makes clear, the variability of ingredients (raw vs. pasteurized milk as the most obvious) and techniques (aging), as well as of our own palates, is such that we simply do not know how this cheese originally tasted.

39 In the “Élégie historique” that ends the Physiologie du goût (441–443), the resolutely progressist Brillat pities earlier ages for being deprived of the gustatory delights available to him and his contemporaries, and he also pities the gastronomes of 1825 for the delights that science and exploration will bring only in 1900.

40 Marcel Proust, “Combray,” in Proust, À la recherche du temps perdu, 4 vols., ed. J. Y. Tadié (Paris, 1987–1989), vol. 1: Du côté de chez Swann, 44–47. The madeleine is not the only instance of the collective resonance of individual taste in the novel. On a picnic with his friends, the adolescent narrator rejects the cheese sandwiches as “unknowing and new food” (“nourriture ignorante et nouvelle”) with which he can have no conversation. He much prefers the “learned” cakes and the “chatty” tarts that, like the madeleine, return him to his childhood (“les gâteaux étaient instructs, les tartes étaient bavardes. Il y avait dans les premiers des fadeurs de crème et dans les seconds des fraîcheurs de fruits qui en savaient long sur Combray, . . . Léonie, Françoise”); ibid., vol. 2: À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, 257.
itself. Irremediably subjective and patently objective, taste writes the intertwined histories of women and men and their times. But those histories need a language to translate private sensation into communal idiom. Just as diners in the real world rely on the samplings and tastings of critics as well as friends, readers accept Proust as their aesthetic “supertaster” who resurrects the whole of the past through his sampling of this morsel.

At once the least and the most capacious of the senses, taste is routinely equated with life itself. Tastes set us apart, as Simmel and Bourdieu insist, and they bring us together, as Brillat and Proust hope. As so movingly depicted in the 1994 Taiwanese film Eat Drink Man Woman, losing our sense of taste alienates us from ourselves and from others. This wonderfully evocative film, directed by Ang Lee, brings all the senses of taste into play—the pleasures, the pain, and the problems, the singular and the social, the sensual and the spiritual.

Chu is a master chef who can no longer taste the dishes he creates with such skill. A widower, he expresses his love for his three daughters through food. Blind to his distress, they reject his magnificent culinary offerings. His taste is not theirs. Things are not set to rights, communication reestablished, and the family restored until the love affairs of daughters and father transform their lives and connect each with the others.

The film lingers over the materiality of food and the conflicts between tradition and modernity that reach far beyond food. (The oldest daughter is a militant Christian; the middle is a high-powered executive; the youngest works at McDonald’s.)

A gift, taste yet requires training. The middle daughter has inherited her father’s exceptional palate and, like him, needs to cook seriously. In a final scene, sharing a dinner that his daughter has prepared, Chef Chu realizes, suddenly, that he can taste. Recovering his taste for others brings back Chu’s own. He has become whole and part of a whole. It is an exemplary tale of life fulfilled in a shared taste.

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