



How does one represent taste? A restaurant reviewer or food blogger might say that it is with the right combination of adjectives and similes and metaphors, or by juxtaposing lush color photos with piquant poetic prose. A Bourdieu scholar may invoke modes of social distinction, expressions of class and power, and analyses of individual pretensions. A physiologist or nutritionist could opt to draw a quadrisectioned tongue, noting regions of tastebud densities and mappings to Western discursive framings. And what of a sensory anthropologist? Would she write taste as reflective narratives and subjective-objective counter-positionings? Or an artist? A dancer? Perhaps through form and color, gesture and movement?

Taken within academic gastronomy—an emerging systems-based approach to food scholarship—the same question requires a slow re-thinking of the two key words: represent and taste. Not limited to the practices of restaurant kitchens, gastronomy considers food as an ecology of complex systems, and representation as part of the entangled continuum of the making-doing of matter and meaning. Representation, and its public face, reporting, become part of an iterative and ongoing process of research-creation activities, in order to be seen not as the textual (or graphic, or performed) translation of an observed ‘truth,’ but as a thing produced in its own right. From this same gastronomic perspective, taste is interpreted as the result of a series of interactions—an assemblage of cultural and bodily processes, of temporal and physio-chemical effects. To liberally paraphrase Bruno Latour, taste is the network traced out by the interactions of food, mouths, minds, socio-technical contexts, and language. Taste therefore invokes place, and material-discursive agency, and—to be somewhat circular—representation.

In the discussions that have taken place within and surrounding the immersive sensory environment of *Displace*, we have struggled with ways to describe the sensing that takes place when food (or other edible matter) is placed in the mouth. Calling it “tasting” alone presents a good deal of trouble in this context: if imagined in isolation from the senses of smell, touch, and sight—and even hearing and proprioception—taste is reduced to the conventional limitations of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. Recent discourse has added a “fifth taste”—that of umami—and perhaps a sixth—fat. Yet such extensions only nominally enliven the possibilities for expressing the sensory impact when food penetrates our corporeal boundaries. What of the trigeminal sensations of prickliness, astringency, and metallic-ness, or the more straightforward feelings of cold and hot? Not to mention the heavy load of emotionality and recollection that invariably accompanies ingestion. When you eat a forkful of your grandfather’s chicken paprikash, lifted from a crockpot at the family’s lakeside cottage on a sultry summer afternoon, what is your response to How does it taste, boychik?

One purpose of academic gastronomy is to acknowledge and make perceivable the entwining of food matter and discourse with the processes and interactions that bring about a mutual state of becoming between eaters and things that are eaten. This acknowledgement takes place in reporting—that is, in the showing of the doing, as well as the showing that doing is inseparable from what is conventionally called ‘knowledge.’ Current writings and discussions on research-creation address this merging and blurring, as do Lisa Heldke’s notions of the “mentally manual” and “theoretically practical” activities of food making, and the Aristotelian concept of phronesis—the practical wisdom that is neither the doing/making knowledge of *techne* nor the ‘universal’ knowledge of *episteme*. Within these framings, the physical body of the researcher, “man’s first and most natural technical object”, becomes a site of inscription and expression of knowledge, and therefore a necessary element of an environment that performatively represents ideas, structures, and perhaps tastes.

But can taste—or ideas of how something tastes—be transmitted through performance? Or does performance alone, like words or images alone, also fail to represent? Does a presentation of gesture and vocalization—Mmm, so good! he said, his body curving, cat-like, with pleasure—communicate taste itself, or is it still dependent on the socio-historic sedimentations of emotive and linguistic conventions? One of the remarkable qualities of taste is the coupling of a powerful affective impact with a wily elusiveness to cognitive description. But can the “prepersonal intensity” of affect be harnessed and transmitted, in order to bind with words and pictures and things, in order to reach a place of meaningful representation?

The anthropologist Stephen Tyler has proposed a “post-modern ethnography,” one that doesn’t tell by means of the written observations of a distanced researcher, but which evokes through “a series of juxtaposed paratactic tellings of a shared circumstance”. It engages with the reader by leaving gaps and requirements to be filled in or completed, and thereby inducing a sense of observed experience. It creates a history of interferences and intersections of people and things and places, and the patterns left behind by their interactions. Perhaps such a construction, then—a thing that has never existed—would be one way to bring together the many representational and non-representational modalities that would do justice to taste.

As a sensory ecology, *Displace* offers up a tracery of historic acts and a physical, present-tense environment of opportunities for engagement. Gustible elements are available and interwoven, sometimes distinct and sometimes inseparable from their sibling sensory stimuli. A narrative is suggested, yet the gaps left are plenty—waiting to be filled in, interpreted, reflected upon, and maybe even talked about. Here is an occasion to think and feel the senses together. Has taste been represented?

references

- See Latour’s 2005 discussion of the nature of networks, actors, and associations in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- A sense of fullness in the mouth, experienced when eating foods high in glutamates, such as Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, certain mushrooms and algae, fermented fish sauces, and of course the so-called flavour enhancer, MSG (monosodium glutamate).
- As determined by l’École Nationale Supérieure de Biologie Appliquée à la Nutrition et à l’Alimentation and the Centre Européen des Sciences du Goût in 2005.
- See the journal *INFLExions* (inflexions.org), hosted by the Concordia University-based Sense Lab (senselab.ca).
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- Tyler, Stephen A. 2010. “Post-Modern Ethnography.” *In Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 126.