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Dimensions of taste

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Seven dimensions of taste – an example

What do we mean, when we say that something tastes “good”? Recently, we prepared and served a fish dish, and we identified seven dimensions:

1. we taste aesthetically and think the fish tastes good and it is a pleasure to eat;
2. we taste in relation to health and are pleased that fish is healthy (regarding proteins and omega-3 and 6) and that it is healthy to have time for each other in connection with the meal;
3. we use our sense of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, i.e. the entire sensory repertoire;
4. we discuss organic fish farming, fishing and sustainability when we conclude with pleasure that the fish taste good because they it is organic and the fish is caught ‘locally’;
5. we activate the religious taste, thinking that the meal is heavenly;
6. we clearly sense that the food is prepared with love and experience the taste of a loving meal;
7. we agree that by serving and eating food in this way, we are trendy in the manner of celebrities.



Seven dimensions of taste – a scheme

If we put these seven dimensions into a scheme, it may look as follows:

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Pleasant taste	Pleasure	Aesthetics, incl. gastronomy
Healthy taste	Well-being and nutrition	Knowledge about health, incl. nutritional science
Sensed taste	Sensory perception	Knowledge about sensory perception, incl. sensory science
Moral taste	Social norms	Ethics, incl. food ethics
Religious taste	Faith	Knowledge about faith, incl. religious food and meal rituals
Loving taste	Love/ passion	Knowledge about love articulated through food/ meals
Trendy taste	Style	Knowledge about fashion and style expressed through food/ meals

Let's go through all the seven dimensions of taste, one at a time.



Pleasant taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Pleasant taste	Pleasure. Does it taste good or bad?	Aesthetics, incl. gastronomy

In Denmark, the trend towards an aesthetic kitchen was launched in 2000 with Claus Meyer's and Ole Poulsen's book **Meyer's Kitchen Children**.

The program of the book was presented as follows:

We believe that in the end, the desire to cook and spend time around the table is best developed when

students experience that food is something we prepare with some level of gastronomic enthusiasm, for our own pleasure and that of others. We believe in challenging students' taste buds early, at an early stage and stimulating their desire to explore the opportunities and mysteries of cooking on their own (Meyer & Poulsen, 2000: 4).

Discussion:

Think of a meal you had or prepared recently: What does it mean that something tastes good or bad, and how does it manifest itself in the taste?

It is well known that it is difficult to substantiate whether and why something tastes good or bad. But try this three step model:

1. Do you like or do you dislike the taste? This is the first step: "I like or I dislike lasagne"
2. But then you have to substantiate your judgment: What does it remind you of? For instance, the taste of lasagne may be reminiscent of Italy, nice weather and big families.
3. Finally you have to understand that your opinion isn't shared by everyone. Who shares your opinion, and who doesn't? In one culture, crispy pork crackling is delicious, whereas in another, pork is abominable. It is important that the students learn that this is the case.



Healthy taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Healthy taste	Well-being and nutrition. Does it taste healthy or unhealthy?	Knowledge about health and nutrition, incl. knowledge about personal and social well-being and nutritional science

Healthy taste can be put into a two aspects' perspective: Well-being and nutrition

Health in a Well-being Perspective

Well-being is linked to personal involvement and social food and meal values. If meal communities are built on joy of life, equality and social responsibility, they can contribute to furthering social well-being.

Well-being signifies a comfortable feeling that entails energy, drive, resolve and positive experience in cooking and eating with others.

Health in a Nutrition Perspective

The other aspect is related to the nutritional health concept. We can work with nutrition on the basis of the three main sources of energy: protein, fat and carbohydrates in connection with groups of food,

which makes the sources easier to recognize in their everyday forms. But we also have to include vitamins, fatty acids and minerals as well as energy demand and balance.

Discussion:

Think of a meal you had or prepared recently: What does it mean that something tastes healthy or un-

healthy? Try to use these three categories in your discussion:

1. digestion and factors influencing the energy demand;
2. the impact of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, fatty acids, fibres, vitamins and minerals on illness and health;
3. the content of energy, energy-providing nutrients, fatty acids, fibre and significant content of vitamins and minerals in foods.



Sensed taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Sensed taste	Sensory perception. Does it give you a sense experience or does it not?	Knowledge about sensory perception, incl. sensory science

When we talk about sensed taste, we are dealing with a dimension of taste that leads the discussion in a sensory and physical/chemical direction. In other words, sensed taste regards the sense of taste, i.e. the complex connections between the biological taste buds, the associated biochemical processes and the psychological sense experiences.

The sense buds are sensitive towards the five different basic flavours: sour, sweet, salty, bitter and umami.

However, the sensed taste cannot be reduced to this description because it will always be a result of an integrated multisensory process in the brain that encompasses chemical taste, smell, mouth feeling, sight and hearing. Further, it does not make sense to perceive the experience of taste as merely a sense-physiological occurrence. It also always has a social, psychological and cultural dimension that is connected to norms, education, life style, aesthetics, values and identity.

Discussion:

Think of a meal you had or prepared recently: What does it mean that it gave you a sense experience? Try to use these three categories in your discussion and

when you practice basic methods of cooking and preparation, i.e. boiling, frying, thickening, baking, grinding and preserving:

1. identify the basic flavors: sour, sweet, salty, bitter and umami;
2. combine the additional dimensions of flavor: Not just taste, but also smell, mouth feeling, sight and hearing;
3. put all the dimensions of flavor into a social, psychological and cultural dimension.



Moral taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Moral taste	Social norms. Is the taste morally or politically acceptable or is it not?	Ethics, incl. food ethics

Here, we distinguish between what is morally right and wrong. We develop taste norms. It tastes ‘right’ to eat sustainable products, whereas it leaves us with a ‘bad’ taste in our mouth to eat foods produced under socially unacceptable conditions. Eggs are a good example: should we make our omelet from cheap, conventionally produced eggs or choose the ones from free-range chickens? It is hard to tell whether our family will be able to taste the difference, but surely eggs from chickens who have roamed around in a field will give a better ‘gut feeling’ and therefore better taste?

Taste norms can, in turn, form the basis of taste pol-

icy, i.e. politically binding decisions of what we can and cannot eat, or what is imposed with high or low taxes. In US, taste politics often deal with food justice. In Denmark, taste politics are primarily linked to health policy: alcohol, cigarettes and sugar-rich products are tax liable. In other countries, good taste is also rewarded, e.g. In South Korea, where ‘the Korean cow’ is protected by practically banning the import of beef. Another example is France, where all schools work one week a year with ‘La semaine du goût’ [the taste and flavor week]. Here, the students learn to distinguish between French gastronomy and, for example, ketchup, burgers and other foreign types of food.

Discussion:

Think of a meal you had or prepared recently: Try to evaluate it from the point of view of food moral. Should we avoid to eat food from animals that have

suffered, or fruit, coffee etc. from farms with bad working conditions?

1. Is there something that gives you a “bad teste”?
2. Try to generalize: When are certain foods ethically acceptable, and when are they not?
3. Should certain foods be politically forbidden?



Religious taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Religious taste	Faith. Does the taste of the meal have a spiritual dimension, or has it not? Does it have a 'us/them' function?	Knowledge about faith, incl. religious food and meal rituals

We can distinguish between two different ways of talking about religious taste. One takes its point of departure in food and meals with a focus on the transcendent effect of the meal or the dish. When you eat something special with religious taste, it gives you a spiritual experience. One example is the Christians' "communion" which is repeated during church services when the celebrant stands at the altar and refers to the bread as 'the body of Christ' and the wine as 'the blood of Christ': Eating a piece of bread and a tiny glass of wine gives you the feeling of getting closer to God.

The other focuses on the function of food or meals as a ritual community, which – with reference to the holy god and/or a holy principle – creates religious identity. Many people in Denmark, who are not particularly religious, still eat a Christmas meal, because it is rooted in cultural history and give them a feeling of belonging to a cultural community. It seems that all religions have a relation to food, and food plays an important role in religious context, both in the spiritual sense and in the sense of creating a social or cultural identity.

Discussion:

Based on examples from your own background – for instance your family background – compare food

and meal cultures from different religions, eras and places. Try to identify and discuss:

1. What is 'right' and 'wrong' in terms of eating in a particular religious context?
2. What is the social significance of a religious meal: Does it create social identity? Or does it create trust e.g. has a spiritual dimension?



Loving taste

The taste dimension	What is it about?	What kind of knowledge do we need?
Loving taste	Love/passion. Does the taste or the meal have a love or passion dimension?	Knowledge about love articulated through food/ meals

Meals are not only about nutrition and cleanliness but just as much about love and responsiveness. The love relation represented by the meal can go two ways. First, it can be a relation between the one who cooks the meal and the one or more people who eat it. The chef or the person cooking uses the food and the meal as a medium to express their love. The food and meal constitute a declaration of love expressed through taste. Second, the food and meal make up a framework for a love relation between those who eat.

The meal can be a framework for e.g. parental love or romantic seduction. The food, meal and presentation let the receiver sense (taste, see, smell, hear and feel) whether the cook has expressed love. For example, love – of children, friends and family – can

be expressed through daily cooking or crammed into the children's packed lunches.

Loving taste is a result of both individual dishes and meal community. In terms of taste, the taste elements need to be balanced so that the dish is not too chili, bitter, sour or salty, and the mouth feeling should be soft and seductive. The community should be intimate and arranged so as to avoid distracting elements. A popular example is the meal in Walt Disney's Lady and the Tramp: Spaghetti Bolognese served under a starlit sky, and with an accordion-playing chef in the background, creates a framework for seduction, and the food is bursting with love for the eating guests.

Discussion:

Think of a meal you had or prepared recently: Try to evaluate it from the point of view of love and passion:

1. Did it has a love dimension?
2. Are there certain ingredients, tastes or recipes that incarnate love? Try to identify them.



Trendy taste

The taste dimension

What is it about?

What kind of knowledge do we need?

Trendy taste

Style. Is the taste or meal trendy or old fashioned?

Knowledge about fashion and style expressed through food/meals

Something is trendy because it is a style associated with the present. Something is not trendy if it is seen as representative of yesterday's style – or that of last year or the last decade. This is also the case of ingredients, taste and meals. Some ingredients taste old fashioned, while others are really trendy. But looking back, what was trendy two years ago is just so old fashioned today.

Also, chefs, restaurants, food writers, so-called ‘foodies’, street food venues may be trendy or old fashioned. In Denmark and the Nordic countries, the so-called “New Nordic Kitchen” has been trendy for about ten years using local ingredients and preparing them in a way with links into the regional traditions. However, just twenty years ago, smart food was Italian or Spanish food, followed – ten years ago – by Japanese food, for instance sushi.

Discussion:

Try to find an example of a trendy food culture or a trendy meal or taste. Discuss:

1. Why is that meal particularly trendy?
2. Is it part of a general trend?
3. When will it become old fashioned?



How to argue about taste?

It is not enough to be able to identify the seven taste dimensions. One also have to know how to argue about taste, as this is important in a cultivated meal community. One cannot say, that "I know that this tastes good", because 'good taste' is a case of individual judgment, i.e. a case of personal experience. In comparison we know that something is healthy, because we can refer to scientific knowledge concerning well-being and nutrition.

In order to participate in a social discussion of taste, we have suggested the following scheme of forms of knowledge and arguments related to each taste dimension. The ideal is to be able to use one's judgement of taste, thus becoming a responsible and reflexive authority of taste.

Dimension of taste	Knowledge form	Form of argument
Pleasant taste	'I experience'	Aesthetic
Healthy taste	'I know'	Health professional
Sensed taste	'I sense'	Sensory
Moral taste	'It is my opinion'	Normative
Religious taste	'I believe'	Based on faith
Loving taste	'I feel'	Expressive
Trendy taste	'I think'	Based on trend