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Exploring Folk Art

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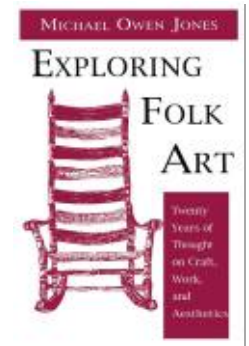
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The Proof Is in the Pudding: The Role of Sensation in Food Choice as Revealed by Sensory Deprivation

"Some habits never change," remarked a student in a paper for one of my classes on foodways in America: "a hot dog on a stick and lemonade at the beach, hot chocolate at the ice skating rink, and chocolate-covered raisins at the movies." While free to choose from among many foods and methods of preparation and situations in which to eat, we tend to develop patterns of behavior. Moreover, many people today still produce some of their own foods, whether livestock on a farm or alfalfa sprouts in the cupboard and herbs in a pot on the patio. Some make a ritual of food shopping. Most of us prepare, serve, and eat in customary or habitual ways at birthdays, holidays, weddings, soirees, and on other occasions. We participate in picnics, ice cream socials, clam bakes, pancake suppers, and backyard barbeques. We go on pizza runs, make a special event of dining out, and assemble at a fast-food restaurant as something to do and someplace to do it.

From 1973 through 1975, I gave several classes on foodways and eating habits in America. But then I quit. There was a large body of literature on primitive subsistence patterns and peasant customs in Africa and Latin America, ethnic and rural traditions in the United States documented during the 1940s and 1950s, and nutritional curiosities, needs, and recommendations. But there was little about the customs and traditions of nonethnic, contemporary dwellers in suburbia like me and most of the students in my classes.

Even the special issue of *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* (1971) on contemporary foodways in American folklife tends to emphasize the traditions of ethnic and rural groups, although essays do advance inquiry by raising questions about the symbolic, expressive, and communicative aspects of food selection and consumption. But in general, the methods prevailing at the time were not able to handle the complexity and heterogeneity of foodways and eating habits in America.

"In the present state of eclectic variety," asked one researcher, "how do we

study American folk cookery?" Don Yoder's answer to his own question was that "we can approach American cookery (1) ethnographically, and (2) historically" (1972:336). Don Yoder has authored many excellent essays on dishes and recipes prepared by the Pennsylvania Germans, especially in the past. Such studies conform to his conception of folklife as the entirety of a "folk-culture" in a pre-industrial era (1963). He offers many examples of historical and ethnic traditions in the remainder of his article on folk cookery, but he does not illustrate or analyze the kinds of behavior of modern urbanites except to point out the disbandment of older traditions.

Why do people eat what they eat? It has been contended often that food choice depends on what is accessible in the environment or attainable because of historical and technological developments or economic conditions; or it depends on what the culture permits and what the society insists is appropriate. Such views long served the need for broad generalizations, prevailing during earlier years of research on people who were thought to compose homogeneous populations with fixed behavior patterns and unchanging attitudes. But they are challenged often when applied to specific instances of foodways and eating behavior in contemporary America.

Eventually I changed the problem for consideration. To answer the question of why we eat what we do, I asked, What is the fundamental nature of eating that makes this activity unique? It seemed to me that understanding what is distinctive about eating helps us appreciate why preparing, serving, and consuming food often provide bases for interaction, serve as vehicles of communication, and constitute sources of associations and symbolic meanings. I explored these ideas in a paper for the centenary meeting of the (English) Folklore Society in 1978; the essay was later published (1980d).

But I still did not offer a course again on foodways in America, for there was no collection of essays that seemed appropriate as a textbook. At the American Folklore Society meeting in Los Angeles in 1979, however, Elizabeth Mosby Adler gave a paper called "Creative Eating: The Oreo Syndrome," Tim Lloyd spoke on "The Cincinnati Chili Culinary Complex," Thomas A. Adler remarked on "Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition," and several other people explored yet other aspects of contemporary customs. During the summer and fall of 1980, I edited papers with Bruce Giuliano and Roberta Krell, and prepared a prologue, epilogue, and introductions to three sections of essays incorporating my earlier paper on perspectives in the study of eating behavior (1981).

The foodways volume focuses on the sensory and social dimensions of food consumption. At the time that it appeared in print, I gave the paper below at the Southern California Academy of Sciences meeting. My intent was to elaborate on the role of sensation in food choice. To do so, I reviewed taped interviews with my mother a few years before when I asked her a number of questions about the effects of a loss of smell, suffered in an auto accident, on her eating behavior.

It was not the first time I had based research on a family member. I was one of my own subjects in the study of home-owner remodelers. In 1980 I gave a paper at the California Folklore Society meeting called "G. I. Joe and the Germs: Conceptualizing Form" (1980b), which focuses on the play of my son and a friend of his.

Folklorists have long studied expressive forms that they themselves engage in, although they have not always admitted doing so. In "' . . . And You Put the Load Right on Me': Alternative Informants in Folklore," Lee Haring even suggests that "the folklorist's best and only subject is himself" (1974:66). One of the most extensive studies in which the researcher uses herself and her experiences as the data base is Cathy A. Brooks's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Meaning of Childhood Experiences: A Dialectical Hermeneutic" (1980). In it, she describes her "getting of taste" through the kinds of furnishings purchased by her parents, the attitudes of peers, and the art projects required of her by teachers.

What follows is a brief study of how my mother's loss of smell affected some aspects of her food preparation and food choice as well as her associations and memories. The paper is to be included in a special issue of *Southwest Folklore* on eating behavior in America, edited by Keith and Kathy Cunningham at Northern Arizona University. Another recent anthology is *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (1984), whose papers do indeed, as the book's title suggests, concern ways that group identity is thought to be expressed through foodways. An article examining the complexity of this issue is Robert A. Georges's "You Often Eat What Others Think You Are: Food as an Index of Others' Conceptions of Who One Is" (1984). It is based on the author's personal experiences of being a guest and a host and having such other social identities as nephew, chef, and Greek.

* * *

"So there are ways in which your food preferences have changed as a result of your having lost your sense of smell?" I asked my mother. The question was rhetorical, for I knew that she had lost her ability to smell in 1953, the result of head injuries suffered in an automobile accident, and I was aware that this condition had affected food choice. What I did not know, but wanted to find out, was what changes in particular had occurred in her eating behavior as a consequence of sensory deprivation.

"Yes, I suppose so," she replied in answer to the question about whether food preferences had changed. "But chicken and dumplings I still like," she continued, smiling while reflecting on the taste sensation of a food she had enjoyed many times in her youth. "I think maybe I like that because I remember."

"You mean, remember how it used to be?"

"Yeah; it was soooo good," she said. "I would just sit there and eat dish after dish."

We were sitting in the dining area of the kitchen; my wife was preparing something to eat, although I do not recall what it was. The date was 30 December 1972. The place was our house in Los Angeles. Present with me were my wife, Jane, and our five-year-old son, David; my mother, Anne Jones; and my wife's mother and father, Alice and Ralph Dicker—the latter three

visiting from Kansas. My father had died a few months before, shortly after an earlier visit by my parents. My mother and my wife's parents had been at our house for several days, together, during the Christmas holidays. Often food was a topic of conversation, as it is for other people in similar circumstances. Having long been curious about the effects of the loss of a sense of smell on my mother's eating habits, I took the opportunity to inquire.

Sensory Deprivation

"Did you ever get a feeling that you could actually smell it," I asked, referring to the chicken and dumplings, "even though you cannot, because of this association?"

"Sometimes," she said. "Sometimes I wonder if my smelling ability isn't coming back. I'm just so sure I smelled something," she contended. "Then I try again, but I can't smell a thing."

"Is that the case with food other than chicken—chicken and dumplings?"

"Yes, I have occasionally thought I could smell something, but I've gone back to it and tried to smell it, and pretty soon I can't do it at all." She continued: "I know I still can't smell, because I eat green peppers, raw, for my lunch many times and the other teachers will say, 'Oh, I know Anne's got green peppers again because I can smell them,' but I don't smell a thing." She concluded: "I like them because they're crunchy."

I was tape recording our conversation, considering some of the exchange an "interview," for in a week or so I would begin teaching a course on foodways and eating habits. While there was a substantial amount of literature on food preference and avoidance with which I was familiar, none of it focused on sensory deprivation; the greatest lack, however, seemed to be that of recognizing the fundamental significance of sensation in food choice. Other factors instead were emphasized: what is available, what one has been taught to eat in childhood, what the culture insists or the society demands, and so on. "Food attitude scales"—based on questionnaires used to determine food preferences—referred to preferences for or aversions to items like "steak" or "liver," "spinach" or "carrots" but did not consider how food was prepared or served, or how well. Anyway, having read and thought about the topic of food choice, I was anxious to explore the matter in greater detail. My mother seemed a suitable subject, the circumstances were propitious, and my interest was keen.

At first my mother was unable to recall, 19 years after the accident, how food preferences had changed. "I still think the problem is that I've been so long without a sense of smell. But I love lemon pie because I can taste that," she said, noting current preferences. "It's got the sour, see, that is delicious."

I asked her for other preferences now.

"Oh, ice cream; I much prefer a sherbert," she added.

"Why?"

"Because of the sourness, I guess—like pineapple, lemon. With real ice cream—it's chocolate I prefer. I think it must be the texture."

"Does chocolate ice cream have a different texture from vanilla?"

"It does to me, um hmmm. Thick, thicker. Raspberry Revel is delicious. We got that at the Hillsborough [store] and I love that, because there's all that sweetness. I can get the sweetness."

"So there are some preferences as a result of losing your sense of smell?"

"Yes," she said, "and on my salads, I have some preferences there," she continued, observing a change in food choice. "I used to like French dressing best, but now I like the blue cheese."

"What's the difference, now, without a sense of smell?"

"I think the French dressing's got too much sour. See, that's got more vinegar taste than blue cheese. I didn't like the blue cheese for quite a while and that was your father's favorite, and all of a sudden I began to like it. I like the thousand island," she added; "it's got a lot of pickle in it. Oh, and I like pickles; you can taste them—sweet pickles."

"Not dill?"

"Oh, I like dill, but not like the sweet pickles."

"Anything else that you prefer now?"

"Strawberry, strawberry preserves or cherry preserves are the best kind of preserves. I don't care for blueberries. Your father liked blueberries, but I can't get anything from a blueberry. . . . Too bland," she added.

"What's a strawberry? Sweet, or sour, or both?"

"I like the fresh strawberry because it's got a texture to it, which you can get. And the marmalades, the lemon and orange marmalades; there you got a texture. A lot better than—like grape jelly or apple jelly. I'm not much for that. Your father liked apple jelly but I never could see why, because there's not enough to it to get anything out of it."

"Did you like it before you lost your sense of smell?"

"I don't remember that far back, but I imagine I did."

"What about pies now?"

"Apple pie, cherry pie, lemon or cream pie doesn't do much for me."

"Pumpkin?"

"Yeah, I like pumpkin but it's the spice in the pumpkin. Some people put a lot of anise in it; I don't like that," said my mother, for it makes the pie taste bitter.

"Mincemeat?"

"Yes, mincemeat is good. It's got lots of flavor," she said, remarking on the sweetness of the raisin and the sourness of the apple as well as on the different textures.

I then asked her about some Italian sausage we had had recently. “I got some spiciness, but not very much,” she said; “mostly texture.” The sausage was very rich, she said, too rich to eat more than once a week. I next asked her about pizza, which she denied having eaten much of, largely because it seems so “doughy” and she did not want much bread—or not as much as she once ate. “So there are some ways in which your food preferences have changed as a result of a loss of smell?” I asked, by way of summary. It was to this question that she responded, “Yes, I suppose so. But chicken and dumplings I still like. I think maybe I like that because I can remember.”

“You mean, remember how it used to be?”

“Yeah; it was *soooo* good,” she said. “I would just sit there and eat dish after dish.”

These few remarks by my mother suggest that after losing the sense of smell she became preoccupied with taste—sweet and sour—and texture—crunchy, lumpy, crispy, velvety. As if in reinforcement of this point, she added a few minutes later that while she does not like cake, she does enjoy the nut breads my wife, Jane, makes, as well as fruit cakes. Why? “Because they’re full of nuts and fruits; I guess I get that texture, or whatever I get—the sour and the sweet.” As a consequence of her condition, then, the focus on a food’s distinguishing features shifted from olfactory concern to tactile and taste considerations; there was no mention of the visual sense, perhaps because she took it for granted, nor any remarks about the aural, although the crispy and crunchy sensations are as much auditory as they are tactile. In addition, only half of the taste sensations were pleasant—sweet, and also sour if not too pronounced or if balanced by sweetness—whereas the other half—bitter, and salty—were unpleasant. Indeed, she ceased to drink coffee and to eat licorice because of their bitterness and she objected to heavily salted foods.

Something else striking about my mother’s comments is the materialistic, acquisitive, and active quality of her phraseology. Repeatedly, she employed such phrases as “[The food] doesn’t do anything *for* me”; “I get something *out of it*”; “It does not do anything *to* me”; “I *get* the texture and the sweet and sour.” She did not say, “It *has* this or that texture or taste”; rather, she phrased the matter in far more dramatic, subjective, and personal terms, observing whether the food had qualities that *affected* her or that could be *given up* to her for sensual enjoyment. This stress on the affective qualities of food was apparent throughout the conversation, even, or especially, when she talked about her search for new and interesting dishes.

“I read a recipe about curried chicken and I thought maybe that would have a special flavor to me,” she said, “but I didn’t get a thing, so I just didn’t do it again.”

On several other occasions trying a new food or drink was disappointing.

"I read a lot about hot, spiced cider, but it isn't as good as the story reads," she told me.

"You didn't like it?" I asked in surprise.

"No, I didn't like it. They had something—the PTA had something for Christmas. It was hot and everybody was going on about how wonderful it was. I thought it was very *undelicious*. . . . I think probably it was full of spices, but to me it was just a hot, sour drink."

Some things she had enjoyed in the past, such as coffee and licorice, she could not even tolerate after the accident. "Coffee is bitter; that's why I don't like it any more," she said. "I've tried it with cream and it still isn't good."

"What did you say earlier about liver and onions," I asked; "why don't you fix them any longer?"

"Because I don't get anything from the onions. It's just like having fried liver; so if you're going to have liver, just have fried liver."

Only occasionally did she eat liver at all after losing her sense of smell. "Food is food," she said. "You eat it just to be eating, I think. Not because there's any wonderful flavor about it or odor to it. You just eat it." She elaborated, noting that she had once enjoyed preparing dinners and going to dinner in the homes of others. Some of the food, such as chicken and roasts, she continued to eat, "but not for the same reason," she said. "Just because it's food." Once it was delicious, but more recently, she said, "it's just food."

There were, however, some pleasant gustatory experiences after the accident, which surprised my mother. From my wife a year before the interview she had learned to prepare *ratatouille*, and often she made it for herself at home. And she recalled vividly a few months before when Jane had served beef and broccoli stir-fried in a wok. "Those were not cooked very long and they're really good and I was surprised how good they were," she said. "It was unexpected. I didn't think they'd taste that way. . . . I love broccoli, but I never ate it that way. I've eaten it raw and well done, but never just kind of cooked briefly two or three minutes. It's delicious," she said. "Your father put up with it when he was here this summer, but I could see he was just putting up with it."

In addition to both disappointment and satisfaction with new dishes that my mother sought or happened to be served, there is apparent in her remarks a disaffection with certain foods she once liked, such as cream pies, fried chicken (unless moist inside and crispy outside), liver and onions, coffee, nuts and peanut butter (in regard to which aroma predominates), and green olives (which, she said, had become bitter to her). Moreover, there were foods she liked later that she had not enjoyed before losing her sense of smell or that she could not imagine having enjoyed: the stir-fried broccoli, for example, and hamburgers with condiments like mustard, tomato, and pickles (before the accident she invariably ordered a hamburger plain). In addition,

some things that she never ate before, or that she did not enjoy eating, she neither ate nor enjoyed after losing her ability to smell food. A case in point is fish and seafood, the fish because she could still recall the unpleasant odor of it in canned form, and seafood such as oysters and shrimp because she thought they were ugly creatures. Finally, she continued to eat some foods that she had enjoyed before the accident, not because they were especially interesting and not necessarily getting much from them with respect to sensation; rather, the eating of chicken and dumplings, other chicken dishes, and beef roast brought to mind memories of earlier, pleasant experiences with these foods both socially and sensorially.

The Role of Sensation

An interview is not the best source of information about a person's eating behavior, especially when the interviewer wants the subject to reconstruct events occurring over a 20-year period. Nevertheless, my mother said enough to demonstrate that sensation played an important role in her choice of foods, to suggest that particular circumstances rather than general conditions must be considered when attempting to ascertain why people eat what they do (or do not eat), and to indicate ways in which, and the extent to which, food habits might be generated and continued, modified, or extinguished.

In regard to my mother, principal among the factors affecting food preferences and food choice were notable sensory events and major social experiences. Some of the social experiences that she described in the course of the taped interview were growing up on a farm in Kansas in the 1920s and 1930s, marriage, working, and increased interaction with others (including my wife) following the death of her spouse. But even in her reminiscences about these major social experiences, the focus seemed to be on sensation: in regard to childhood, the memory of freshly dug "new potatoes," of the succulent fried chicken and other foods her grandmother prepared, and of fresh greens in the spring, including wild plants like lamb's quarter and sour dock and poke, which followed several weeks or months during the winter when the only vegetables available were home-canned ones or shriveled potatoes; with respect to marriage, the recall of my father's food preferences, whether they corresponded to my mother's or not; in regard to working, the dependence on convenience and fast food; and with respect to my father's death, the increased interaction with neighbors, fellow teachers, and my wife, from all of whom my mother obtained recipes for new dishes or different ways to prepare familiar foods.

What appears to be of greatest importance, then, and what I have therefore emphasized in this report, is the matter of sensation, which later in her life seemed to dominate my mother's concerns about food. For it was

during the last 25 years of her life (she died in 1976) that she was deprived of one of her senses—that of smell. While there were disappointments—“food is food,” she said; “it’s just food now”—the very disappointments themselves, the search for new and interesting dishes or methods of preparation, and the recollections of earlier, pleasant sensations leave no doubt that the sensory quality of food continued to be important even though she had lost one source of sensation, and thus her ability to appreciate food was substantially reduced.

It might be argued that sensory deprivation of this sort is not typical of the human population. Yet every one of us at some time—often several times in our lives, and for periods of varying length—is deprived of a sense of smell when we have a cold. And many other people are born without, or later lose, the sense of sight or hearing. In addition, one researcher—Dr. Robert I. Henkin, director of the Center for Molecular Nutrition and Sensory Disorders at the Georgetown University Medical Center—estimates that perhaps a million or more Americans suffer a loss of taste acuity—the ability to distinguish tastes—or a distortion of taste and smell. Causes are unknown, but aberrations of taste and smell are symptoms of the common cold and of hepatitis, often accompany pregnancy or follow an attack of the flu, or result from head injury.¹ Some instances, though not necessarily all, seem to be linked to an imbalance in the amount of zinc in the saliva. Whatever the cause or causes of distortion of taste and smell, the point is that taste or smell dysfunction is not that rare in the species, and further, such an extreme instance of condition and consequence as found in my mother and her behavior serves to emphasize the role of sensation in food choice that in less exaggerated form is common to us all.

Conclusions

“The pleasures of the table are for every man of every land, and no matter what place in history or society,” begins one of the aphorisms of Brillat-Savarin, writing in 1825 about the physiology of taste; “they can be a part of all his other pleasures, and they last the longest, to console him when he has outlived the rest” (Brillat-Savarin 1978:3). Although often taking food for granted, especially once we have satisfied our hunger, we sometimes reflect on the uniqueness of eating. We might not be inspired to author a treatise called “Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy,” as was Brillat-Savarin, but probably we would make some similar observations, realizing that one of the distinguishing features of eating is that it involves so many senses and sensations. Having these sense impressions, and remembering them, it is no wonder that sometimes we crave something moist and tart, crisp and salty, chewy and sweet, warm and doughy, or thick and filling; that

we cherish some earlier experiences with food; or that we long to reproduce an event that was memorable.

Above all else, eating is a physiological and an intellectual experience, unique in the range and intensity of effect; it is ongoing, at once familiar and yet also novel, with past experiences becoming part of the meaning of food as each subsequent meal is eaten. In providing pleasures and satisfactions personally and immediately, food can enliven social relations, enrich spiritual affairs, and enhance an individual's sense of well-being; it can be used to threaten, reward, cajole, or punish and in other ways manipulate behavior. Fasting might be uplifting and the denial of food by others devastating. Eating as a recurrent experience in the lives of human beings results in the generation of preferences and dislikes, and even of disgust and aversion. Because food affects so many senses and produces such a broad spectrum of states, the timing and the manner of preparation, service, and consumption of food assume special importance, resulting in the development of skills, values, and criteria for evaluating these activities and the foods connected with them. Any study of why people eat what they do, then, must begin with the uniqueness of eating, including as it does the sensory domain.² That this injunction is defensible should be obvious to us when we reflect on what eating is, and on what eating means to us. "The proof is in the pudding," as it were.

Notes

1. See Berton Roueché (1977), which was called to my attention by Susan Gordon, a student in the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA and one of my research assistants [employed as Program Officer of the California Council for the Humanities, beginning September 1986].
2. Much of this paragraph is a condensation of what I wrote for the introduction to "The Sensory Domain" (1981).