

From the Taste of Food to the Foods of Our Memories



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RD

It's commonly said that there's no accounting for taste. But what is taste?

The fact is, the tastes we experience when we take a bite of food are dependent on the food (external input) as well as how we perceive the taste (our sensory experience). So the question becomes: How do we really taste food? Is it through the taste buds, the nose, the eyes, or ... the memory?

For example, when chocolate comes in contact with our taste buds, we experience sweet-bitter tastes, and it may recall the chocolate treats of childhood. But when we taste the salty *umami* flavors of soy sauce, this is likely a simpler experience, with fewer memories but enhanced tremendously by the foods it accompanies, whether an egg roll or a piece of sushi.

The basics of taste

Thanks to an ingenious network of over 10,000 taste buds on average, we are able to savor a multitude of taste variations. This is provided, of course, that we are conscious and aware of what happens in the mouth with every bite we take.

The primary tastes are experienced *on the tongue*, which has five taste receptors (sweet, sour, salty, bitter and *umami*).

To get the full experience of taste, however, we also have to perceive secondary tastes.

While eating, a lot of food

molecules enter through the back of the mouth *into the nose*. It is in this hidden, simultaneous process in which the nose plays an important role.

When we have a cold, we know this is true. How would a strawberry taste if you lost the ability to smell intensely the sweet flavors? Would this fruit "taste" as delicious?

Do we also "taste" with our eyes or really only with the taste buds and the nose? Is this appealing tomato in winter really full of taste or are we misled by the beautiful red color and round shape? When we see a tomato, the brain is able to imagine how this food might taste by *reactivating memories* of delicious tomatoes. The brain can then decide based on these memories whether we will eat it.

So we can ask ourselves whether we are really experiencing the taste of the tomatoes on our plate or eating only those good memories? Mindful eating, with a moment-to-moment focus on taste, appears to strengthen the immediate experience over what might be expected from our memories.

When no longer eating on automatic pilot, we might also realize that a milk chocolate candy bar that evokes childhood memories isn't at all as satisfying as a smaller piece of gourmet dark chocolate or that a cookie isn't as full of taste as we expected; realizing this quickly might help us from eating "too much."

Other aspects of eating also contribute to our experience and level of enjoyment. There's the sensory difference between the crispiness of French fries and the velvety mouth-filling sensation of creamy mashed

potatoes. This is the *tactile dimension* that comes into play when we taste foods. We're also able to experience taste differences in hot and cold dishes, the sensations of mint (menthol) that give an impression of refreshment, or the sharp heat of chilies.

What do our sensory experiences really tell us?

How can we rely on the senses for choosing quality food that is, full of flavor, and at the same time takes good care of the body? Becoming aware of all sensory sensations is the first important step. By practicing mindfulness and living as much as possible in the present moment, we will taste food in another way. We can explore how bringing attention to the taste experience reveals new aspects of a favorite food and can transform our experience of it. The cultivation of a beginner's mind and an open, curious attitude of "not knowing" are the key in this exploration process. Tasting food in this way also keeps us from overeating "comfort" foods that trigger good memories, but may not really have quality flavors.

Slowly savoring food is a fascinating, joyful experience that provides insight and inner wisdom at the same time.

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COMMUNITY SHARING:

We asked members of our community a few questions to reflect on the role of taste in their experience of mindful eating. Here is what they had to say:

What senses do you engage when tasting food?

“The joy of presentation is really important to me. I love the colors and aesthetic possibilities of food - it seems to enhance the taste!”
~ *Rachelle Choueiri*

“Smell, hearing (I listen to the sound of biting down on the food), tasting, texture, imagination (source of all the ingredients), area of the tongue (sweet, sour, salty).”

Is curiosity about the taste of food a factor in mindfulness? How so?

“More anticipation than curiosity, I would say...By being so present in the moment while eating, I find that I’m creating a stronger “meal memory” that I can draw on a little later in the day, and still feel the satisfaction and enjoyment of the senses that I originally felt during that meal, and it’s satisfying to my body all over again.”
~ *Mike Gaston*

“It teaches many things on a moment-to-moment basis, e.g. that each nut in a handful tastes differently.”

“Yes, sometimes need to look at an old favorite food with new curiosity. I had a client who “loved” Pringles chips but when eaten slowly, mindfully, she realized she was just after the salt and didn’t really like them after all!”
~ *Sarah, RDN, Madison WI*



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How do you reflect on the experience of taste, texture and flavors in your mindful eating practice?

“I try to identify the individual flavors in the food.”
~ *Elizabeth Peters, MBA*

“I like to think about how taste, texture and flavors make food a deep sensory experience elevating eating to more than just the process of refueling. I also like to reflect on the work of the cook in combining these aspects in a dish skillfully and express my gratitude to them in each bite.” ~ *Rachelle Choueiri*

“I first relax into the bite, much like mindful breathing in yoga. I look at the food as I bring it close, close my eyes, smell the aromas, and remind myself to chew slowly and completely. If I do it right, I can feel a physical rush down my spine as I breathe during the chewing.”
~ *Mike Gaston*



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