Touch and the Aesthetics of Food

Sanna Hirvonen

Both food and the sense of touch were mostly ignored throughout the history of Western philosophy. Finally times have changed, and research is done on touch and on food even in Anglo-American aesthetics. This paper brings the topics together by looking into the importance of touch in our aesthetic experiences of and around food. Once one turns away from the exalted realm of art and other exceptional experiences, it is evident that cooking and eating can provide important aesthetic pleasures in our everyday lives. I will argue that touch plays a fundamental role in three different, aesthetically important dimensions related to eating. The first one is sensory and concerns the pleasures of the mouthfeel of food. The second is cognitive and relates to touch being a source of information about what is eaten. The third is the role of touch in the actions of preparing and having a meal. | *Keywords: Touch, Food, Evereday Aesthetics, Embodied Experience*

1. Introduction

This paper aims to show the importance of touch in our aesthetic experiences around food. The role of touch in eating is obvious, as we feel the food in our mouths when biting, chewing, and swallowing. However, its aesthetic role hasn't received much attention. This paper provides an overview of the crucial importance of touch along three different dimensions: in the sensory pleasures of eating, in acquiring knowledge about what is eaten, and in the actions performed in getting ingredients, preparing meals, and eating.

Eating is fundamentally a bodily, multisensory experience, whereby it might seem odd to focus on one sense in isolation from others. However, in the case of touch the singular focus is justified because it has been overlooked in aesthetics and philosophy more generally. By focusing on the numerous ways that touch matters in our pleasures around food, we can appreciate it more and pay closer attention to its fundamental role in our everyday aesthetic experiences more generally.

Traditionally, touch was not considered a sense that could deliver aesthetic experiences, nor was food considered an object of aesthetic experiences. I will thus begin the paper with a discussion of the everyday aesthetics approach adopted in this paper (section 2). The aim is to provide a framework that shows how eating and other actions around food can count as aesthetic experiences.

Touch is a complex phenomenon. In addition to how things feel on our skin, other sensory modalities might be included under the broad label 'touch': proprioception which informs us of the position of our body, kinesthesis which informs us of movement, sensitivity to temperature, pain, and itch. One of the reasons that touch, smell, and taste were considered 'lower' senses was the misguided idea that they only give us bodily sensations. But touch does inform us of the genuine, objective properties of the external world as well. Roberts (2022) calls that 'haptic touch':

> touch is capable of delivering richly exteroceptive experiences: that is, experiences of objects and features that are external to the body. [...] An embodied subject deploys haptic touch when, for instance, they lift and grip an object; squeeze, swing, or flex it in the hands; or run their fingers over its surface. Dynamic and exploratory activities such as these enable the perception of an array of properties that belong to material objects, such as rigidity, elasticity, weight, balance, solidity, tension, pliability, and smoothness. (Roberts, 2022, p. 49)

When discussing touch and food, we may also distinguish between touch in the broader bodily sense as described above, and touching with our mouths. The way food and drink feel in our mouths is called their 'mouthfeel', and it is a crucial component in our liking or disliking what we eat. In section 3 we focus on mouthfeel and how the different textures of foods play a crucial role in our sensory enjoyment.

Section 4 focuses on the information touch can give us about food and the role that knowledge can play in aesthetic experiences. Throughout our lives, we have gained a huge memory bank of the tactile properties of foods. We are thus able to distinguish qualities such as freshness or being well-cooked with our hands and mouths (section 4.1) In section 4.2 I suggest that such knowledge allows us to perceive the functional beauty of food items, namely their beauty *qua* things to eat. Finally, in section 4 we look at the role of touch in aesthetically pleasing actions around eating such as getting produce, setting the table, and cooking.

2. Everyday Aesthetics

This paper aims to show the aesthetic importance of touch in ordinary contexts that relate to food. My approach to aesthetics thus focuses on the mundane, everyday experiences which I believe can be aesthetic experiences.[1] In this paper, there is no space to enter deep into the debates around everyday aesthetics, such as what makes the experiences we are talking about *aesthetic*. However, let me briefly explain where my view differs from some of the typical assumptions made in traditional, Western analytical aesthetics ('traditional aesthetics' for short, but the reader should keep in mind that the focus is purely on Western aesthetics). I will outline an approach to aesthetics in which experiences and judgments around food can be considered to be aesthetic.

[1] For general expositions and defenses of everyday aesthetics, see e.g. Light and Smith (2005), Saito (2007), Irvin (2008a), Leddy (2012a), Scruton (2007). For a brief but illuminating history of what some of the most influential figures in the history of aesthetics said about everyday aesthetics, see Leddy (2012b).

Traditional aesthetics tends to take art as the prototypical object of aesthetic experiences which has created presuppositions that radically limit its scope. For example, it is often held that an experience can be an aesthetic experience only if it is caused by an object that is sufficiently similar to art, or that the experience itself is sufficiently similar to an experience of a work of art.[2] In the approach adopted here, perceiving *art* should be seen as an exceptional, rather than a typical, aesthetic experience, and the prototypical aesthetic experiences are much more mundane, for example, sitting by a still lake on a perfectly quiet summer night, smelling a pine forest, or enjoying cooking in a clean, elegant and functional kitchen.[3]

Let me mention one line of criticism towards everyday aesthetics that I take to go to the heart of the differences between art-centred aesthetics and everyday aesthetics. Dowling (2010) argues along Kantian grounds that the fundamental problem of extending the notion of 'the aesthetic' to include everyday pleasurable things is that it risks losing the *normativity* of the aesthetic. As Kant famously held, when we make judgments of beauty, we demand the agreement of others. But we don't demand it in the case of judgments related to the agreeable, like the taste of a wine, since they belong to the domain of the subjective. Since pleasure in everyday things is considered to be purely subjective, there can be no such thing as the normativity of everyday *aesthetic* judgments. In other words, there cannot be mistaken everyday aesthetic judgments, criticism about them, or constructive debates that would require others to reconsider their judgments.

Dowling can be considered to present us with a dilemma. The first horn states that aesthetic experiences and judgments aim at objectivity, and therefore ordinary experiences are not aesthetic as they belong to the realm of the subjective. The second horn holds that ordinary experiences can be aesthetic, but due to their subjectivity, aspirations to objectivity are no longer a hallmark of aesthetic judgments and experiences. Dowling's arguments cannot be discussed here in detail, but they rely on beliefs that are built into the general picture adopted by traditional aesthetics. These consist of the ideas that aesthetic experiences and judgments have correctness conditions and therefore aesthetics is normative. Moreover, there is a hierarchy of senses based on the degree of objectivity –typically equated with proximity– that they have in providing us input from the world. Finally, one should distinguish between judgments of taste proper versus personal preference or subjective, non-universal pleasure. Judging requires reasoning and argumentation in contrast to the brute, sensory pleasure-based 'I like it' types of states to which no reasons can be given.

[2] For a discussion on how experiences of art differ from everyday aesthetic experiences, see Saito (2007).

[3] See e.g. Saito (2007) and Naukkarinen (2017) for a defence of the view that an aesthetic experience need not be in any sense exceptional. For a defence of the opposite position, see Leddy (2012a).

Of the above beliefs, the most problematic one is the idea of the hierarchy of senses.[4] First, it is wrong to believe that touch gives us mostly inner sensations rather than information about the external world. Think of say, a blind person and the way they can operate in the world based on touch only, or of the sense of smell and how it guides us and other animals. Second, if taste, smell, and touch didn't provide us with the information about things edible and inedible that they do, we would have never survived as a species. All the senses provide us with plenty of objective information about the world: that is their function. On the flip side of the coin, all the senses are somewhat subjective or idiosyncratic. For example, our colour perception is known to differ; there are systematic individual differences regarding the objects that people focus on when looking at a scene (de Haas et al., 2019); we don't all see or hear equally well; attention affects what we perceive with regards to all the senses, and so on.

A second problematic belief is the strong dichotomy between judgments of taste that aim at universal validity and those based on purely subjective preferences. Even if we stick to the prototypical aesthetic judgments about beauty or the sublime regarding works of art, it seems reasonable to hold that such judgments are based on a mix of objective, cognitive evaluations and idiosyncratic, non-universal subjective pleasures or displeasures the work gives us. Kant may be right that we *demand* the agreement of others, and if our fellow art experiencer disagrees with our judgment, we might proceed to give arguments and not accept their differing opinion as a valid one. But ultimately, we all like what we like, even if we were armed with all the knowledge and experience in the world to use in our arguments to defend our judgment. That is a more subjectivist stance than is often defended in traditional aesthetics. It doesn't deny that there are plenty of topics in aesthetics that can be discussed and argued for. Moreover, there is a huge amount of agreement in what we find pleasing as we all are humans, equipped with the same senses, and our broad preferences have been moulded by evolution. I would say that a lot that falls under the domain of aesthetics is normative only within a particular time and subculture, and even then, there must be room for plenty of *faultless disagreements*.

In short, I believe that the way out of Dowling's dilemma is to accept the second horn and give up the idea that objectivity is the *hallmark* of the aesthetic. We can accept that aesthetic experiences and judgments can be objective in the limited sense described above, namely, that there can be sensible criticism and disagreements, even if they may not be ultimately solvable. Giving up objectivity also doesn't mean endorsing a subjectivist anything-goes position where a random sensation counts as an aesthetic experience. Rather, there is a continuum of aesthetic experiences and accompanying judgments that vary on separate dimensions, for example, the amount of pleasure, sensory input, knowledge or understanding the experience offers us.

[4] For a detailed history of the hierarchy of the senses, see Korsmeyer (1999, ch. 1).

Here are some examples of the varying kinds of experiences in the suggested continuum of the aesthetic. We might have the experience of seeing and smelling the overflowing trash bins on a street on a hot summer day which is an unpleasant, negative aesthetic experience. Its characteristics are sensory (the looks, the smell), the negative valence the smell causes, and possibly some accompanying thoughts (for example, wondering whether the city is struggling to pay for the trash truck to come often enough).

Another experience might be that of wandering around a traditional artisanal market while travelling in a new country. It might be a strongly positive aesthetic experience that includes seeing and touching the items and learning about the ways they are made, the skills involved, and the kind of people who become artisans in the country. The experience will involve the market itself with its sights, sounds, smells, feels, temperature, etc. Unlike the trash bins, the market experience is clearly more cognitively involved, as one is faced with a lot of novelty and the learning that ensues, and it is also sensorily much richer.

A third kind of case would be seeing one's favourite band play a concert. Again, the experience involves the senses of hearing the music, seeing the show, feeling the people crowding around, smelling the room and the audience, and so on. In this case, we can assume that there is a very strong pleasure component as well as a lot of cognitive evaluation regarding what and how they play, how it compared to their previous concerts in different cities etc. This last case leads perhaps to the most typical aesthetic judgments in the traditional sense, since one has strong expertise and is therefore able to engage in criticism. However, why one likes that band in particular remains a subjective preference, and the arguments given cannot by themselves convince anyone to become a fan of the band.[5]

These are just a few examples, but they illustrate the features which matter for making an experience *aesthetic*: they are based on sensory experiences, those sensory experiences can be judged as pleasurable or not pleasurable, and they have a cognitive component. Once we give up the strong normativity requirement, we can accept that most of our aesthetic experiences come from our everyday experiences. Just think of the experiences one has during an ordinary day: enjoying meals, appreciating beautiful weather (or disappreciating ugly weather), choosing one's clothes based on what looks good, listening to music, watching a film, noticing someone good-looking, or enjoying the way a friend looks when they're laughing. These are 'humdrum' experiences while *also* being aesthetic experiences.

In short, I think we are constantly having aesthetic experiences of varying intensity. They can be 'automatic' in the sense that they happen without us

[5] Steely Dan is an example of a band that divides people, even though excellent arguments can be given in their favour. It exemplifies objectively measurable positive aesthetic qualities: fantastic musicianship by the best session musicians, musically complex, finely crafted songs, great production and sound, and lyrics that are well-written, original and interesting. However, you can never convince someone who doesn't like Steely Dan to like them just because, musically speaking, they are excellent; personal preference always remains the ultimate deciding factor.

doing anything special or entering a distinct state of mind.[6] An example would be walking through a lush park, smelling its aromatic air, and seeing its rich nature. One need not stop and 'forest bathe' since ordinary perception is enough to make it pleasurable, as long as one is not totally oblivious to one's surroundings. Naturally, such experiences can be made more intense by carefully paying attention to them, but that's just mindfulness: *every* experience is more intense when one is properly paying attention and "savouring the moment."

That is my suggestion as the answer to the 'paradox of everyday aesthetics' (see e.g. Saito (2007) for a discussion). The paradox can be stated roughly as follows:

> The Paradox of Everyday Aesthetics
> 1. Everyday experiences can be special aesthetic experiences.
> 2. If an experience is a special aesthetic experience it is not an everyday experience.
> Conclusion: Everyday experiences cannot be special aesthetic experiences.

In other words, the paradox assumes that aesthetic experiences are special. Thus, having an aesthetic experience elevates an experience of an ordinary object or event so that the experience itself is no longer an everyday experience. And thereby a contradiction follows, as the everyday experience turns out not to be an everyday experience. However, if one rejects the idea that aesthetic experiences are special and accepts that they can be completely commonplace, there is no paradox in the first place. To me, that seems exactly right. When we move through our everyday lives, they are full of rather unremarkable and mildly pleasant or unpleasant experiences, which are nevertheless aesthetic experiences. As mentioned above, these experiences can become heightened due to mindfulness and paying attention. However, such heightening is by no means required for the experience to be an *aesthetic* experience.

This concludes the summary of the notion of 'the aesthetic' used in this paper. I take it for granted that eating and preparing meals can be aesthetic experiences in the humble sense adopted here. Perullo (2016), who likewise assumes that eating experiences can be aesthetic, calls this a 'lowering strategy', where rather than trying to show how food can be art or similar to art, we need to lower the standards of what counts as aesthetic.

Thus, eating, cooking, and preparing meals *can* be aesthetic experiences. However, since those activities have to be repeated often, that means that we might go through them on an autopilot, not paying attention at all. Such experiences are not aesthetic. Likewise, some people's approach to eating might be such that they see it as a pure necessity and eat only for nutrition's sake without getting any enjoyment out of it. They are also not having aesthetic experiences of food. Now, the question of how aesthetic experience

[6] The view I am defending here thus disagrees with everyday aesthetics theorists such as Irvin (2008b) or Leddy (2012a) who believe that an aesthetic experience requires a special kind of attention or contemplation.

relates to pleasure is a difficult one and there is no space to discuss it here. For the sake of convenience, in the cases where pleasure and aesthetic experience coincide, I will use the terms interchangeably even if in the bigger scheme of things there might be aesthetic experiences that cannot be reduced to experiencing pleasure. In the discussions that follow we will be focusing on both sensory pleasures and knowledge that can be gained via touch, both of which can play a role in aesthetic experiences. Perhaps they cannot even be separated, as suggested by Perullo:

> our first contact with food is modulated by pleasure, a deep pleasure with its roots in the biocultural sphere of primary human drives, a sphere where pleasure and knowledge, need and desire, nutrition and taste are all one. One of our first aesthetic introduction relationships with the external world is one where food is a source of both nourishment *and* enjoyment. (Perullo, 2016, pp. 11–12)

Let us next look at the ways eating and food can provide us with aesthetic experiences and the role that touch plays in them.

3. Flaky Croissants, Bubbly Champagne: Touch and the Sensory Pleasures of Eating

Let us begin by looking at the role touch plays in the sensory pleasures of eating, especially via the role of our mouths in sensing the food's texture or mouthfeel.[7] Much of the discussions around the aesthetics or pleasures of food focus on what is commonly called food's 'taste' or more accurately, its flavour. Flavour perception is a multisensory, temporal process that includes tasting with the tongue, orthonasal smelling via the nose, and retronasal smelling while chewing when the odour molecules enter the nasal passages via the mouth and throat. Vision and hearing also affect our perception of flavour. However, tasting flavours is just one aspect of the pleasurable act of eating. In this section, we will focus on a small but significant part of that act, namely, how the food feels in our mouths and the ways in which that provides pleasure.

We tend to focus on the coming together of the basic tastes and smells in eating. However, it's easy to realise the importance of food's mouthfeel if you think of the difference between the following: fresh and stale bread, pure sugar vs. meringue, well-cooked and overcooked mussels or octopus, crispy or softened potato chips, or pasta *al dente* vs. overcooked pasta. Even though the flavour may be the same, the difference in mouthfeel makes all the difference to whether the item is pleasing or not. Food's flavours and textures change as we bite into it and chew, and all the stages are essential to the experience of perceiving the colloquial 'taste' of the food. Mouritsen, Styrbæk, and Johansen (2017) offer the following examples of the roles mouthfeel plays in our eating experience:

> The careful evaluation of a hot dog amounts to a short course in mouthfeel. In the first place, the sausage, whether it is cooked or grilled, must have a crisp skin. The quality of the sausage is judged by the way it crackles when you bite

[7] A terminological note: for simplicity I only speak of eating and food, but everything that is said here applies equally to drinking and drinks.

> into it—it is good only if you can actually hear it. An ideal hot dog bun should have a thin, crisp crust, but be soft inside. In addition, there may be crunchy, roasted onions and a slice of crisp dill pickle or sauerkraut. Ketchup or mustard must be thick and viscous. Relish must include some firm bits of gherkin; mayonnaise has to be soft and creamy, but not runny. (Mouritsen, Styrbæk, and Johansen 2017, p. 19)

As mentioned earlier, 'touch' is a broad notion that comprises several different senses. Hence, beyond sensing the texture, the sense of temperature is also crucial when eating. We have preconceived notions of what is the correct temperature for serving foods. Usually, they are dictated by the optimal temperature for the flavours and textures in question, but some of the choices are purely conventional. For example, in most countries tea and coffee are only served hot and beer and lemonade cold. If the expectations are violated – for example, your pasta dish arrives cold – we don't enjoy the food. We also enjoy different temperatures for their own sakes. Ice cream, gelato and popsicles are probably the best examples of food items that are pleasing in large part because of their temperature.

We also enjoy the hot and cold sensations that don't have to do with temperature. The heat from chilli peppers, ginger and horseradish and the coolness of peppermint are caused by the stimulation of the trigeminal nerve. The use of chillies is a great example of a tactile sensation with extreme importance on eating pleasures. Chili peppers are a core ingredient in large parts of the world, for example in China, India, Thailand, Mexico or South Korea. When we have a cold, we may be comforted by the dual heat of ginger-lemon tea, where we sense both the actual hot temperature and the apparent heat sensation caused by the trigeminal nerve.

Some dishes owe their fame mainly to their texture. Eating caviar or fish roe is special because of the way it pops in the mouth when bitten, only then revealing the taste. Potato chips, nachos, or toasted *chapulines* (grasshoppers) are appealing because of their crispiness. Champagne and carbonated drinks are pleasurable because of their fizziness and lose their appeal once the bubbles have vanished. Soufflé's goodness lies in its unexpectedly fluffy and light texture that contrasts with the eggy flavour. A French croissant is all about the light and airy dough covered in a crisp, flaky surface. Eating sushi is a festival of textures.[8]

Senses never operate in isolation but cooperate to create our coherent and continuous experience of the world. The same is true of our eating experience where touch interacts with the sense of taste and smell. That interaction is taken advantage of in dishes where the process of biting or chewing transforms both the texture and flavour. Think of the smooth, hard surface of a filled chocolate which cracks open when bitten and soft caramel flows out, or the mild, soft pasta of raviolo which reveals a flavourful filling when bitten. In some of these cases, we are not only getting the enhanced

[8] Anecdotally I might mention that when I temporarily lost my sense of smell and most of my sense of taste due to COVID, of all the things I begrudgingly ate sushi was my favorite because at least it offered a lot of interest in terms of mouthfeel.

pleasures of multiple, contrasting textures but also a *cognitive* appreciation for the inventiveness of the recipe and the effort that has gone into creating the dish.

Surprising mouthfeel sensations can likewise lead to cognitive enjoyment. A lot of the dishes in Ferran Adrià's El Bulli were playing on surprising combinations of textures and flavours, for example, a *granizado* (shaved ice) of salted tomato, or melon caviar, a box of orange balls that look like roe but are in fact spherified melon jelly. Indeed, many of the biggest inventions in molecular cuisine relate to the discoveries of creating new textures such as foams, gels, squishy spheres, or cold smoke.

This section aimed to emphasise the role of touch in our enjoyment of food via its mouthfeel, which has been overlooked at the expense of flavour. I provided a variety of examples of the difference the 'right' texture makes, but also of dishes whose appeal lies mainly in their texture or mouthfeel. Finally, I have given examples of textures that inspire cognitive enjoyment either via their inventiveness or surprisingness. That will lead us to the next section where we focus on what we can learn via touching food with our hands and mouths, and how that plays a role in our aesthetic experiences.

4. The Cognitive Importance of Touch and Mouthfeel to the Functional Beauty of Foods

4.1 What We Can Learn about Food via Touch

As shown in the previous section, touch and mouthfeel are fundamental to the pleasures of eating and drinking. However, they are also important in providing knowledge about what we are eating or drinking, especially qualities such as the texture, freshness or being cooked well. Moreover, evolutionarily speaking it is useful that we have several ways of distinguishing potentially dangerous foods. Indeed, we usually look, smell and touch with our hands first to test whether something is edible. If we can not tell, we proceed to carefully put it in our mouths, where both flavour and mouthfeel help us decide.

The understanding of textures that we gain since we are children generally provides us with knowledge of what we are eating. For example, we can evaluate the freshness of most uncooked vegetables by their textures – they should normally be crisp or hard and juicy. The same goes with most produce: avocado should be creamy, not hard or mushy, mushrooms should have bite but not be chewy, and oysters should be plump and wet. These are just a couple of examples, but if you think about it, we have a tactile recognitional memory of how each food item or drink ought to feel in our mouths. This is also borne out in our behaviour; when something does not feel right, we quickly spit it out.

Often we only need to touch food with our hands to tell its freshness. Baked items such as bread or croissants do not look different when they become stale, but the moment we touch them we can tell their freshness based on the texture. The cognitive value of touch is evident in markets selling fresh

produce, where shoppers lift, touch, and lightly squeeze the fruits and vegetables to find the best ones. Just like with the mouthfeel of foods, we have tactile memories of how things feel in our hands. If you close your eyes and someone hands you food items, you are usually able to tell not only which ones they are, but also whether they are ripe.

Recognising freshness and ripeness by touch is not the only thing that touch tells us. For example, lifting a croissant tells us whether it is good, as a croissant should be full of air and hence light relative to its size. One can also tell a lot about the density of bread based on its weight. One of the essential steps when cooking many meals is testing the texture to find out whether it is cooked. We may do this with our mouths as with pasta, with a fork as with potatoes, or with our fingers to see if a panna cotta is set. When we are kneading bread, the changing texture which we feel in our hands tells us whether we need to keep kneading.

4.2 The Functional Beauty of Food

We can gain plenty of information about food items by touching them either with our hands or mouths. In this section, I want to put forward some ideas regarding food's aesthetic properties when considered as a functional object, namely a thing to eat. There is a lot to be said about theories of functional beauty which are well beyond the scope of this paper, so the following thoughts should be taken as a tentative sketch to be developed in detail elsewhere. However, I hope that they highlight a cognitive dimension in which food can be considered to have aesthetic properties. In a nutshell, the idea is that when produce such as vegetables are evaluated in light of their function as food, their perceptual qualities that display positive functional qualities, such as ripeness and freshness, make the produce appear functionally beautiful. Moreover, touch is one of the main methods of discovering it.

Now, objects that have a function can be evaluated aesthetically in two main ways: either as 'pure' objects, to be observed independently, or with respect to a function for it. In the second case, the function enters the aesthetic evaluation so that we expect its sensible properties to cohere with the function. Hence, a chair made out of thin glass might be beautiful when looked at as a pure object, but functionally, it is not beautiful since one cannot sit on it. Functional beauty is thus a positive aesthetic quality which derives partly from the knowledge that the object *qua* a certain kind of object fulfils its function well (Parsons and Carlson, 2008). Saito argues that a part of the aesthetic value of a functional object comes from understanding how its design features contribute to its function:

> I can appreciate *the way in which* the materials, design, size, and craftsmanship are integrated to provide the superb functional quality. So, although it is true that various practical and utilitarian purposes are intimately bound up with our everyday experience, such integration does not necessarily compete with the aesthetic value. In fact, I believe it is a mistake to find aesthetic value in everyday objects and activities only insofar as we momentarily isolate them from their everyday use and contemplate them as if they were art objects created specifically for display. If we divorce them from their practical significance in our lives, we will miss a rich array of aesthetic values integrated with utilitarian contexts. (Saito, 2007, p. 27)

Food as such is a functional object *per excellence* since its main reason to exist is to nourish us. It thus seems natural to consider them as being able to have functional beauty.

Now, one of the core questions in the debates on functional beauty has been how to define the function by which an object's functional aesthetic qualities should be assessed (see e.g. Parsons and Carlson (2008), Paris (2020)). I would like to suggest that functions should be understood relative to agents and contexts, as the theory of functional beauty can naturally be applied to objects that are not made and thus do not have a proper or intended function. For example, a tree does not have a proper function, but we can be looking at a tree *qua* a climbing tree, material for logs, or as a part of an ecosystem. In each context, very different perceptual properties stand out as relevant. Food produce like fruits and vegetables can be likewise seen as having numerous functions depending on the context. For example, a row of flowering bean plants can be seen as beautiful not only because of their looks, but because they improve the soil, they will provide food to eat, or because they attract pollinators.

Whereas Parsons and Carlson (2008) and Paris (2020) focus only on functional beauty as perceived visually, Roberts (2022) argues that haptic touch can be equally or more important in perceiving functional beauty:

> Felt qualities such as hardness, flexibility, weight, and manoeuvrability are no less capable of grounding attributions of functional beauty than the visual characteristics that have been the focus of existing treatments of this phenomenon. (Roberts, 2022, p. 58)

Moreover, he points out that items such as old, scruffy cookware might not look functionally beautiful, but prove to be that once handled (Roberts, 2022, p. 58, fn 13).

When we are considering a food item *qua* a thing to eat, we want to know about properties such as ripeness, freshness, maturity and general quality as a thing of its kind. If a vegetable is ripe it can be considered functionally beautiful because it will fulfill well its role as food. That is where the knowledge about ripeness acquired by touch enters: it can ground attributions of functional beauty. A good example of what I would argue are attributions of functional beauty is given by chefs and other shoppers in markets when they look, lift, handle and smell produce and exclaim "Beautiful!". They are considering the produce as ingredients for meals, hence judging those properties that indicate their edible qualities. Touch is one of the main instruments we can use in judging whether foods are fit for their function.

Generally speaking, the same story applies to prepared food items and dishes, though less with touching by hand and more by touching with the mouth. Their function is to be eaten, and they fulfil that function well when they are nourishing and pleasing to eat, which requires that they are well cooked. The best way to evaluate whether they have the functional beauty of being good to eat is naturally by tasting them, and as was emphasised earlier, mouthfeel is one of the core indicators of whether an ingredient or a dish is well cooked. This

implies that there is a distinction between the aesthetic pleasure of tasting a well-made dish and the aesthetic pleasure of tasting a dish and thereby learning that it has the functional beauty of a well-made dish. That might seem like an excessive piling up of aesthetic qualities. However, I think the distinction becomes clear when we imagine tasting whether a dish that we don not like is ready. We can appreciate that it's a well-made dish and fit for its function of being eaten and enjoyed by others – hence functionally beautiful – but we personally would not gain pleasure from eating it.

To summarise, in section 3 I argued that touch allows us to sense the mouthfeel of foods which is a fundamental element in the aesthetic pleasures that food provides us. In this section, I have focused on how touch gives us knowledge of food's properties, for example, its freshness or the way it was made. I have further suggested that such knowledge can ground attributions of functional beauty to foods which is distinct from the sensory aesthetic qualities. Let us next look at the third dimension in which touch matters for the aesthetics of food, namely via its role in the actions that constitute preparing and having a meal.

5. The Role of Touch in Preparing and Having a Meal

Let us now focus on the role of touch in the broader context of our everyday actions with food and the aesthetic experiences they provide. I will give examples to show how the enjoyment that comes from preparing a meal and eating essentially includes touch. Furthermore, we will look at some experimental data which shows the role that touch plays in both cognitive and hedonic evaluations of eating experiences and foods. The examples and the data not only show the importance of touch but also emphasise the interplay of all the senses in our experiences around food.[9]

Let us begin with the various pleasurable activities involved in getting ingredients. One of the joys of shopping in a farmer's market comes from touching the fruits and vegetables and selecting the freshest ones based on their textures. There is a lot of satisfaction in carrying under one's arm a fresh, large loaf of bread or a heavy watermelon, or an entire crate of berries or mushrooms. Even better than a market is getting right to the source, for example by picking berries, fruit or vegetables, collecting mushrooms, or getting herbs from the garden. All of those actions involve the whole body, but perhaps most importantly, the fine-tuned movements of the hands and fingers in plucking a berry, of uncovering a mushroom under foliage and cutting it with a knife, or pulling a carrot from the ground by its leaves. Such actions feel particularly gratifying since we are in touch with the ingredient in its natural state and environment before we proceed to clean and prepare it in the kitchen.

Cooking is equally a bodily activity which requires a lot of fine hand movements and manual skills such as cutting various shapes with a knife,

[9] Shusterman (2016) provides a complementary discussion of further ways in which other bodily actions or perceptions such as one's movements or posture and the use of various eating utensils impacts the aesthetics of the eating experience. Some of his examples also include touch or can be classified under a broad definition of 'touch'.

whisking eggs, peeling vegetables and fruit, filleting a fish, opening oysters, pressing citrus, moulding pasta shapes and so on. We also use our hands and fingers to sense the temperature of ingredients, liquids and pans. Those of us who enjoy cooking gain pleasure from exercising our skills and learning new ones, and it may be particularly satisfying to cook a dish which requires a lot of technique or mastery. In that respect, one dimension of the pleasure of cooking is similar to other manual skills like playing an instrument or building a model house.

Once the food is ready to be eaten, which dishes and utensils are used can be extremely important for the aesthetic experience of the eating experience. For example, it is a very different experience to gulp an oyster straight from its shell to picking it up from a plate with a fork, or to eat delivery food from its box with plastic utensils instead of using non-disposable dishes and cutlery. Since our perception of flavours is heavily multimodal, there has been quite a bit of research in the field of gastrophysics on how various features of the eating context influence a dish's perceived flavour or our liking of it. It turns out that restaurants are right to pay attention to absolutely everything from ambient lighting to music to dishes, from glassware to cutlery and much more, as all of those impact how food tastes to us and how pleasurable the overall eating experience is (for an impressively rich overview, see Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014)). A lot of that influence has to do with touch.

First, the choice of eating utensils is important. Different tools are used in different cultures, from just the hands to chopsticks to spoons to a fork and knife. Western culture has also invented plenty of dish-specific tools such as a grapefruit spoon, fondue fork, cake fork, or the whole toolkit that comes for eating crabs. Since cuisines have spread across the world, many of us alternate between these eating utensils depending on the dish. The choice of the way of eating has various impacts on the experience so it may feel, for example, casual or formal (eating pizza by hand vs. using cutlery), more or less authentic (eating Chinese food with chopsticks vs. with a fork and knife), or more primitive vs. artificial (eating a whole fruit by hand vs. using cutlery). Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence (2011) showed in a study that eating with a plastic vs. a stainless steel spoon significantly changed the subjects' evaluations of a yoghurt's quality and how much they liked it. Chefs have realised the importance of ways of eating, so in some avant-garde restaurants a dish comes with instructions to say, eat it by hand.

Beyond its other effects, eating by hand has cognitive advantages. Touching the food with our hands conveys plenty of information about qualities such as temperature, weight, the amount of fat or liquid, consistency and so on. The knowledge thus gained informs our eating experience, potentially altering its aesthetic aspects. Cutlery may also have an impact on how speedily the meal is consumed and hence, the enjoyment of the eating experience. Shoving a hamburger in your mouth with your hands allows taking larger bites than cutting it up with utensils and trying to construct a morsel that has the essential components of the dish, and different-sized forks allow for different quantities to be eaten at once. Little snacks served during an *apéritif* are to be eaten with fingers or toothpicks since they are supposed to be eaten in small enough quantities to keep the appetite for the dinner.

The tactile aspects of the serving dish may be equally important, though there are not many studies yet. In a study by Piqueras-Fiszman et al. (2011), participants were offered the same yoghurt from ceramic bowls that differed in weight but were otherwise identical, and they ate the yoghurts by holding the bowl in their hand. The yoghurt in the heavier dishes was ranked significantly more dense, more expensive, as well as more intense and better in taste. Besides their study, most studies focus on dish size which can be perceived both visually and by holding the plate, thus making it unclear whether the results show the importance of touch in those cases.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the ways in which touch matters for our aesthetic experiences around food. Moreover, I outlined an approach to everyday aesthetics which rejects any aspirations to strong normativity that aesthetics might have. There is still space for limited normativity, rational discussions, and critique, but we should also leave room for personal preferences to which we cannot give reasons – or at least, not the kind of reasons that would convert anyone else to prefer what we prefer. That view is particularly suited for food, where our preferences are moulded by our genetics, personal history, culture and our everyday social contexts.

Touch is a fascinating topic in aesthetics because it emphasises our bodily and temporal nature, which has traditionally been considered an obstacle to the abstract, atemporal and objective quest for universal truths. Hence, even though discussing touch in isolation from the other senses is somewhat artificial, especially with respect to eating, it is important to point out its fundamental role. In this paper, I wanted to provide a general overview of the various roles of touch in our experiences with food in terms of sensory pleasures, in providing knowledge, and in guiding our actions. It is useful to understand how the different sensory modes contribute to our eating experiences to see it as the richly multisensory and bodily experience it is. Preparing food and eating can be aesthetic experiences that involve our whole bodies and also our minds in terms of knowledge, memories and feelings. It doesn't mean that we need to become 'foodies' or aim at eating in fancy restaurants – aesthetic experiences do not need to be special, and we do not need to be particularly invested in order to have them. Rather, since we need to eat regularly anyway, it is worth recognising those events as actual or potential sources of aesthetic experiences. There is beauty in most things; we just need to become aware of it first.[10]

References

Andrzejewski, A. (2021) 'Aesthetic Eating', *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, XXI(62): pp. 269–84. https://doi.org/10.52685/cjp.21.62.3.

de Haas, B., Iakovidis, A.L., Schwarzkopf, D.S. and Gegenfurtner, K.R. (2019) 'Individual Differences in Visual Salience Vary Along Semantic Dimensions', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(24), pp. 11687–11692. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1820553116.

[10] I want to thank the reviewers of the symposium for their helpful comments on this paper.

Dowling, Ch. (2010) 'The Aesthetics of Daily Life', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50(3), pp. 225–42. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayq021.

Irvin, S. (2008a) 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48(1), pp. 29–44. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/aym039.

Irvin, S. (2008b) 'Scratching an Itch', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66(1), pp. 25–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594X.2008.00285.x.

Korsmeyer, C. (1999) *Making Sense of Taste*. Cornell University Press.

Leddy, T. (2012a) *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life.* Peterborough, Ont., London: Broadview Press.

Leddy, T. (2012b) 'The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics', in *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. Peterborough, Ont., London: Broadview Press, pp. 17–56.

Light, A. and Smith, J.M. (2005) *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Mouritsen, O.G., Styrbæk, K. and Johansen, M. (2017) *Mouthfeel: How Texture Makes Taste*. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/mour18076.

Naukkarinen, O. (2017) 'Everyday Aesthetics and Everyday Behavior', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 15 (January), pp. 1–10.

Paris, P. (2020) 'Functional Beauty, Pleasure, and Experience', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 98(3), pp. 516–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2019.1640754.

Parsons, G. and Carlson, A. (2008) *Functional Beauty.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199205240.002.0003.

Perullo, N. (2016) *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food.* Columbia University Press.

Piqueras-Fiszman, B., Harrar, V., Alcaide, J. and Spence, Ch. (2011) 'Does the Weight of the Dish Influence Our Perception of Food?', *Food Quality and Preference,* AGROSTAT 2010, 22(8), pp. 753–756. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2011.05.009.

Piqueras-Fiszman, B. and Spence, Ch. (2011) 'Do the Material Properties of Cutlery Affect the Perception of the Food You Eat? An Exploratory Study', *Journal of Sensory Studies*, 26(5), pp. 358–362. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-459X.2011.00351.x.

Roberts, T. (2022) 'Feeling Fit for Function: Haptic Touch and Aesthetic Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 62(1), pp. 49–61. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayab032.

Saito, Y. (2007) *Everyday Aesthetics*. OUP Oxford.

Scruton, R. (2007) 'In Search of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 47(3), pp. 232–250. https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/aym004.

Shusterman, R. (2016) 'Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating', in Irvin, S. (ed.) *Body Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 261–280.

Spence, Ch. and Piqueras-Fiszman, B. (2014) *The Perfect Meal: The Multisensory Science of Food and Dining*. John Wiley & Sons.

Sanna Hirvonen

University of Lisbon, LanCog Research Group

hirvonen.philosophy@gmail.com

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15839279