

Introduction

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Over the course of about three decades, gustatory aesthetics has gradually established itself as a discipline in its own right, gaining legitimacy and occupying a significant place within academic research. More generally, the entire field known as the *philosophy of food* – which encompasses not only aesthetics but also ethics, politics, epistemology, ontology, technology, and other more specific areas – has become a small but meaningful area of study. It is, therefore, a novel subject, emerging toward the end of the last century and continuing to be enriched by contributions, even in venues that until recently seemed unsuitable. I need only mention the special issue of *Rivista di Estetica* dedicated to wine, *Wineworld* (Perullo, 2012) and the issue of *The Monist* dedicated to food (MacBride, 2018). The main protagonists of this recent history, as well as the reasons behind what has also been termed the *culinary turn* (van der Meulen and Wiesel, 2017), have been analysed and described extensively.¹

Within the realm of aesthetics, the growing interest in gustatory taste and gastronomy is part of the movement known as *everyday aesthetics* (Yuriko Saito),² in which concepts now central to the debate – such as, for example, *aesthetic experience* (Richard Shusterman),³ *aesthetic engagement* (Arnold Berleant),⁴ or *relational aesthetics* (Nicola Perullo)⁵ – play a central role. But even earlier, between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Elizaveta Kravchenko demonstrates in her contribution, there were hints of ‘practical’ gastronomic aesthetics that can be considered precursors to this culinary twist in aesthetics. More broadly, the aesthetics of taste tends to emphasise the non-distal nature of gustatory perception, its participatory and ecological dimensions. Based on this premise, models of aesthetic experience are proposed and their implications are explored.

¹ For a brief history, cfr. Perullo and Koczanowicz (2025).

² Cfr. e.g. Saito (2010).

³ See, for example, Shusterman and Tomlin (2008).

⁴ Among many works, consider: Berleant (2001).

⁵ See Perullo (2025).

As it is evident, however, *gusto* concerns everyone, not just scholars. We all consume food, and many of us prepare it. Lately, thematic interest in gastronomy has grown at an unprecedented rate, affecting every area of culture and mass communication. Food and cooking are a substantial and pervasive part of media discourse. Thus, it would seem entirely pointless, if not downright paradoxical, to continue stressing (as has been appropriately done previously) the importance of food for life and its dignity as a subject of discourse and a field of study, even from a philosophical perspective.

For these reasons, when I was asked to serve as guest editor for this issue of *ESPES*, I decided to propose a different approach. Since it is now widely accepted that *gusto* is not a neglected or overlooked ‘minor’ sense, how can we engage with it in a positive and constructive way? What critical issues does it raise? Where do its tensions, potential, and limitations lie? The time has come to set aside preliminary questions regarding its place in modern (particularly Western) philosophical aesthetics, and finally focus – perhaps with a more pragmatic and phenomenological approach – on what taste *can* and *cannot* do, and on its direct and indirect effects. The essays collected in the present issue bear witness to this new viewpoint. Several central issues emerge repeatedly in these papers that I find highly significant and which I would like to briefly address here to provide some concise insights.

The first is that gustation does not concern exclusively chemical or physical sensitivity. In other words, *gusto* is not limited to the sensory dimension, since it is, at the same time, both the bearer *and* the creator of meanings and values that cannot be reduced to the material dimension. These are social and cultural, symbolic, and metaphysical meanings and values. As I argued a few years ago, one can think of taste as an ongoing *task* that is carried out in every specific situation. *Gusto* is not merely a ‘sense’ (but does it still make sense to distinguish between the senses and their ‘other,’ as Sarah Worth rightly asks in her contribution?); it never acts in isolation, nor does it reflect entirely predetermined criteria and codes. *Gusto* is rather a compass that guides human action, always through the relationships and correspondences of an overall ecology. This is why taste is not solely pleasure or disgust but also knowledge and attention. It requires education, commitment, and participation.

This leads to a second, fundamental aspect underlying several articles in this volume: gustation is at once intimate – unrepresentable and not shareable – *and* communal, a device for social action, a shared tool. As Jacques Derrida, to whom Serena Luce’s important text is dedicated, has clearly shown us, taste retains a secret dimension that points to the impossibility of being fully assimilated. It is an approach that overturns the image of gastronomy and cuisine typically promoted in common discourse and by the media.

From this arises a third point common to the contributions of this issue of *ESPES*: far from being an accommodating ally of consumerism, *gusto* can – and indeed, *should* – constitute an element of *resistance* that is both ethical and political. As demonstrated by Anastasiia Tormakhova, Veronika Tormakhova,

and Dmytro Tovmash, contemporary art, in its participatory and performative forms, often engages with food to draw attention to this critical issue, aiming to raise awareness not only about the excesses and decadence of what I have termed *gastro-gentrification*, but also about the rhetoric of violence and war.

The relationship between gustation and technology is a further crucial element. *Gusto* is, literally, technique (*techne*) – there is no such thing as ‘natural’ taste because it is constructed, requiring cultivation and culture. Today, hyper-aestheticization and spectacularisation, linked to the decadent hedonism that characterises contemporary societies, have created the marketing of ‘experiences’ around taste that must be denounced through critical scrutiny. As Maddalena Borsato and Elena Mancioppi maintain in their original paper, a new ‘marginalisation’ of gastronomic taste might today, in a seemingly paradoxical way, foster this kind of sensitivity and ecological resistance.

This, however, would not mean depriving *gusto* of its centrality. Quite the contrary: it would imply developing an unprecedented agenda to reposition it at the centre of life on ‘new’ foundations (which are, in reality, profound and very ancient). Indeed, food can be understood, as Alexandra Plakias suggests, as a *primary epistemology*, as long as it is not confused with the contemporary supermarket, dominated by the superficiality of immediate visual effects, or with the prevailing *gastro-gentrification*. Pietro Bertino’s article is connected to such a constellation of ideas. Here, gustatory experience is conceived as a tension between standard, canonised, and objectified aesthetic qualities, and dynamic qualities that are purely immanent to the situated experience.

Two other knots investigated in these papers – and worth noting – are the problems and risks associated with the digitalisation of taste and its exclusively human-centred framing. What comes to light from the analyses is a critical sensibility that aims to shift the gustatory aesthetics onto a different plane. Alexander Markov and Anna Sosnovskaya propose a symbiotechnical and post-anthropocentric approach to taste.

In conclusion, this issue of *ESPES* contributes significantly to the development of a field of aesthetic research on taste that still holds great potential for growth and further exploration. Among other things, this new trajectory will increasingly need to free itself from its Eurocentric and modern imagery. In this sense, it will also be important to engage in comparative analysis with other gustatory aesthetics that have been developed around the world throughout history.

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