Knowing Taste

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We most often consider taste as a gateway to aesthetic experiences, which marks a difference between it and other senses, which are primarily considered in terms of the access they provide to the world. Here, I examine the epistemic dimensions of taste and their significance to epistemology more broadly. How have our epistemic paradigms relegated taste to a lesser role, and how might taking food itself more seriously change that? | *Keywords: Taste, Epistemology, Scepticism*

1. Introduction

The senses that have received the most philosophical attention – vision, touch, and (to a lesser extent) hearing – are supposed to put us in contact with the world around us; help us navigate and track external objects.

Taste is different, we're told, because it's more subjective- it happens inside the tasting subject- and because the object of taste is destroyed in the act of tasting. It's different because it's more variable, because it depends more heavily on one's assumptions, context, training, and biology. But also: taste is different because we don't know what it's supposed to do. Taste is a source of pleasure, of course, and philosophically, this is the aspect that receives the most attention. But from an epistemic perspective, which is the one I'll take up here, the question remains: What does taste do? What does *taste* put us in contact with?

The most obvious answer is, taste puts us in contact with the flavours of our food. That is, there are certain *qualities* in our food- call these 'tastes' or 'flavours'- and *taste*, the sense, tracks these qualities. To taste 'correctly' is to accurately identify the qualities in our food. (If this paragraph seems like a linguistic mess, well, yes: the language of taste and tasting is often "erroneous and confusing" (Spence, Smith & Auvray, 2014).

The project of disambiguating taste from flavour, and an account of how olfaction and gustation combine to construct flavours, is far too ambitious to

attempt here. Indeed, throughout what follows I continue to use 'taste' in a way that muddies together flavour (the qualities we detect through gustation and olfaction) and taste (in the sense of basic tastes such as sweet, bitter, etc). The discussion that follows is less concerned with our ability to individuate flavours (and our perceptions of them) than in how we use taste to identify what we're eating. How is taste vulnerable to – or immune from – the epistemic concerns raised about other senses, in particular vision? More fundamentally, what would it mean to trust taste as a guide to the world around us?

2. Food-First Epistemology

Sceptical philosophers have worried that perhaps no belief is immune from doubt; the external world might be an illusion, and the only thing we can be sure of is our own mind. Descartes worried that there might be no external world at all; all the appearances might be a dream, or the work of an 'evil deceiver.' How, he asked, can we trust our senses to reflect reality? How can I trust that my eyes represent the world correctly to me, when in reality I might have no eyes; no hands; no body at all? (Descartes, 2013) These are the questions from which modern Western epistemology proceeds: how to construct knowledge on something more certain, more foundational, than the contingent body and the unreliable senses. Answers have typically proceeded in the Cartesian model, beginning with total scepticism and building up knowledge from scratch. This approach makes sense if we begin with a picture of knowledge as disembodied, general, universal, and rational. Our knowledge of food is none of these.

Given this framing of the problem of knowledge, it is not surprising that epistemologists working in the Western tradition have neglected taste as a form of epistemic access to the world around us. Our early ancestors' quest to escape from predators is well-rehearsed in the literature on evolution and cognition; their quest for food is not. Contemporary sceptical arguments question whether we can trust our cognitive and moral judgments, given that they are saturated with evolutionary influence.[1] Sceptical arguments like these don't deny the relevance of taste so much as overlook it. The question of whether taste might track the truth seems ill-formed: the truth about what, exactly?

The simple answer *is*: the truth about what we're eating. Taste tells us what the thing is: an apple, or perhaps a potato cleverly painted to resemble one. An orange, or a lemon. Cheese or chocolate. But of course, we don't depend on taste alone for this: few of us would put food into our mouths without some prior belief about its identity. Doing so risks disgust or even danger. The writer Jiaying Fan describes their first encounter with an American olive:

> In Chongqing, I had been introduced to them as a fig-like snack, dried or cured, that had a sweet-tart kick. In the U.S., I placed a dark-green drop onto my tongue and, for the first time in my life, spat something out of my mouth and into my palm. Salty and greasy weren't what I was expecting, and my reaction was born as much of disgust as it was of having been deceived. (Fan, 2001)

[1] See for example the essays in Beilby (2002).

Taste confirms or denies our beliefs about what we're eating. There can be pleasure in having our expectations subverted, but to be consistently mistaken is disorienting and alienating:

> To be a new immigrant is to be […] confused by the unfamiliar and unsettled by the familiar-looking. The firm, crumbly white blocks that you mistake for tofu are called feta. The vanilla icing that tastes spoiled is served on top of potatoes and is called sour cream. At a certain point, the trickery of food starts to become mundane. Disgusting foods become regulars in the cafeteria, and at the dinner table. (Fan, 2021)

If we start from the perspective that epistemology begins in food – a 'food first' epistemology – we gain several insights. First, our need to know what we're eating shapes the development of our senses; our senses and environment coevolve so that we can track colour, shape, and size, but also texture, taste, and smell. Our ability to take down large prey and distribute the gains from cooperative hunts likewise points to the coevolution of eating habits and social capacities. Our brains are literally shaped by the activities around food acquisition and preparation.[2]

From this perspective, the question of whether taste and smell might be 'lesser' senses seems positively silly. The question of whether our external environment might be an illusion, and whether we might best be understood as disembodied minds, can only arise from the perspective of someone for whom food has always appeared on the table. The ability to treat food as beneath serious consideration is itself a kind of privilege; only when the body is sufficiently attended to, someone else's responsibility, can we abstract away from it.

But while the epistemic redemption of taste would make for a satisfying narrative arc, matters are not so simple. The disconnect between inner subjectivity and the external world that so worried Descartes has been made manifest, not because of any intrinsic deficiency of the senses, but via a systematic reshaping of our food system and the construction of what we might call (in a nod to another famous sceptical argument) 'facades of flavour' – foods which are cleverly designed to resemble other things.[3]

3. The Sceptic in the Supermarket

Ironically, even as contemporary epistemology has been shaped by the need to answer the sceptic, the contemporary Western supermarket has come to resemble Descartes' sceptical scenario, as the link between our senses and the underlying reality of food itself grows increasingly tenuous. We are increasingly reliant on vision, rather than smell and taste, to signify food's identity as well as its quality. The historian Ai Hisano describes how the use of synthetic colouring allowed manufacturers to develop standard shades

[2] While there may be disagreement on the details of what we were cooking – meat versus vegetable – the consensus remains that cooking our food is part of what allowed us to divert tissue from gut to brain, developing greater cognitive complexity, which in turn fueled cooperation, which in turn allowed us to hunt large game and divide the spoils. See Wrangham (2009) and Skyrms (2003).

[3] This is a nod to Goldman (1976).

that signified flavours such as 'lime' or 'strawberry,' even where these bore little resemblance to the natural colours of those foods: 'the pink shade of strawberry-coloured frosting, for example, was not necessarily the colour of actual strawberries. Nor did the frosting taste like fresh strawberries. But as processed foods flooded the market, consumers learned to identify a specific pink shade as the colour and flavour of 'strawberries' (Hisano, 2019, pp. 95–96).

But colours don't just signify identity; they're used to smooth over natural variation, which in turn might correlate with flavour, season, or quality. Butter is one example:

> The actual shade of butter varied seasonally [...] depending on the kind of cattle feed, the breed of cows, and the period of lactation. During the summer months [...] the color of butter was bright yellow [...] The channel Island cattle breeds generally produced a more highly yellow butter than did Holsteins and Ayrshires [...] the carotene-rich feeds of early summer also added richer flavour, as well as more nutrients, to butter. The bright yellow color signified for producers as well as consumers better eating quality. (Hisano, 2019, pp. 45–46)

Once colour can be manipulated, it loses evidential value. Even as yellow butter continues to signify quality for the consumer, the link between colour, flavour, and nutrition is severed. What was once a meaningful indicator becomes meaningless at best, and often positively misleading.

In other cases, the addition of colour creates false expectations about the natural variation (or absence thereof) and discoloration in produce and meat. Here, artifice is less evident, hence perhaps more troubling. Our reliance on colour to signify freshness leaves us vulnerable to manipulation: an orange isn't always a fresh orange; a green orange isn't necessarily 'green' (Hisano, 2019, pp. 106–107). Tuna that's treated with carbon monoxide takes on an appealing, bright-red colour, which it will retain even as it spoils.

The addition of colours to food, and the transformation of produce to reduce natural variation in appearance in favour of a standard shape and colour, not only remove the link between a food's appearance and its contents and their ripeness, it also means that we no longer have the opportunity to train our senses via exposure to differences.

Notably, the contemporary supermarket offers relatively little sensory interaction with food. We rely instead on testimony from packages and labels to identify what they're buying. We sometimes smell produce (peaches, produce) but even this can be misleading; tomatoes sold on the vine not only look more appealing, but have the fresh tomato-leaf scent that tricks the unwary shopper (Stuckey, 2013, p. 102). In other cases (olive oil, seafood), fraud and mislabelling may be so prevalent that we truly cannot be said to know what we're buying (Olmstead, 2015). Indeed, while I was writing this piece, a story crossed my desk about a butter-fraud ring: roughly thirty years ago, a Mafia-affiliated group approached food buyers across Italy offering butter at a price that seemed too good to be true – and in fact was, because the

'butter' was actually a mix of "chemical additives, oils intended for use in cosmetics and non-food uses, and beef tallow" (International butter fraud, no date). Several buyers, including several of the largest French cheese makers, took the deal. But one company had a policy of tasting before buying, and their tasters identified "a strange, metallic taste" (Sechet, no date), leading them to reject the butter – the only company to do so.[4]

In response to worries about whether our senses are a reliable guide to our environment, philosophers have constructed a model of knowledge that elevates propositional knowledge and certainty above the skill-based mode of navigating a specific and variable environment. In doing so, we've elevated a way of thinking about and valuing food that contributes to the realization of that same sceptical worry: our standardized food environment is no longer amenable to sensory navigation, with the result that our senses become increasingly dulled.

At the same time, our approach to cooking itself has shifted, from a skilled activity using recipes as rough approximations, to an approach that emphasizes recipes as scientific formulas which take consistent ingredients and measures as inputs and offer reliable results in return.

Again, irony lurks: while the algorithmic recipe makes cooking more democratic and accessible, it also reinforces a particular conception of culinary knowledge, consisting in adherence to precise measures, and prescribed timing and temperatures. Consider by contrast the following passage, from an article Mennell winkingly suggests might "not have been cleared by the circulation manager":

> The secret of good cooking may lie, to a certain extent, in [...] accurate weights and measures, and a precise regulation of heat, but this is not all that is necessary. Neither is a good recipe a guarantee that a certain dish will be a success [...]
>
> There is another qualification for successful cookery [...] and that is an intuitive sense of taste and fitness, which is natural to some people. It enables them to tell how a dish will taste [...] and to know instinctively what will be the result of combining certain ingredients. (Mennell, 1985, p. 246)

It would be absurd to argue that recipes do not work or don't constitute knowledge. The question is not which mode of knowledge – intuitive skill or algorithmic recipe – is best full stop, but how our emphasis on one over the other reinforces a certain idea about what knowledge consists in and how claims to knowledge are justified.

But this emphasis isn't fixed, and the advent of new media is changing how we think about cooking. Fellow millennial readers may recall the moment food websites started to feature videos, usually shot from above and tightly edited, showing a disembodied pair of hands stirring garlic in a skillet, sprinkling salt over meat or scattering herbs over a finished dish. Once recipes take the form of videos, we no longer rely solely on measurement or description; while we

[4] The example comes via Karen Constable's *Food Fraud* newsletter (Constable, 2026).

can't taste, we can watch the process unfold and see what the finished product looks like. We can also understand cooking in terms of the aesthetics of action: an activity that's pleasurable in its own right, and not just because of the result.

I haven't said much about taste as a gateway to pleasure, partly because I've been interested in its other dimensions: the way taste relates to philosophical conceptions of knowledge, or to the things we want to know. This desire for knowledge is itself something that can be satisfied by food, and with that satisfaction comes pleasure.

We can also understand pleasure differently: a 'food-first' epistemology opens up space for understanding affective reactions to food in terms other than the aesthetic. For example, there's a pleasure in discovery – discovering something new, or identifying something good. This is not (need not be) an aesthetic reaction; the thrill of discovery is real. The risk is that in an environment offering easy acquisition, food no longer challenges us as it once did (if anything, the challenge now is to avoid food and tame appetites). In today's environment, most of us in the industrialized West don't have to work hard to discover food: it's everywhere. The rewards we might once have gotten from simply finding food now come from finding a good deal on food, or a new flavour or product. If we understand that what we really want is to exercise skill, a few things shift. Rather than ask about how we need to eat differently, we might ask ourselves to attend to our experiences differently, noticing when we are skilful in the kitchen, or clever in our planning, or detect something new about the quality of a food.

Philosophy begins in theory, but food begins in practice: in rituals; action; sensation. Writing about food always carries a certain risk of romanticization of the past, but our memory, too, is shaped by the need to rediscover food, to map and revisit its sources. I began thinking about these ideas while picking blueberries – not this year, but last. I know it must have been July, because that's when blueberries happen around here. As I write this, it's turned to apple picking season. Before calendars, or dates, or school holidays, the appearance and ripening and fading of foods marks the passage of time – another way we know the world around us. We now compare whether seasons come early or late by referring to months and days, but most fundamentally, it arrives; we see it; we want it; we eat.

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