

# Food and the Senses

David E. Sutton

Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale IL 62901;  
email: dsutton@siu.edu

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## Abstract

This review makes the case for anthropological reflection on the intersection of food and the senses. Given that a focus on food and the senses allows us to explore some of the most basic boundaries of inside and outside, private and public, individual and collective, this topic offers an excellent window onto that elusive notion of everyday life that anthropologists wish to understand theoretically and examine ethnographically. At the same time, food is a key component of ritual, which has typically been understood as heightening or stimulating sensory experience to instill social or cosmological values. Food and the senses overlap in notions of taste as distinction and in an increasing recognition of the culturally cultivated phenomenon of synesthesia. Furthermore, in making food and the senses central to understanding wider social issues, this review argues for the productivity of a concept of “gustemology” in opening up new realms of ethnographic and theoretical inquiry.

## INTRODUCTION

As anthropological topics, both food and the senses were long confined to a sort of limbo whereby many anthropologists may have had the intuition that they were important but, for various reasons, did not have the language to address them either as topics of ethnographic analysis or of theoretical development. As a graduate student in the mid-1980s, I had neither “food” nor “the senses” on the radar screen in my coursework or other training; they were, with notable exceptions, consigned to the realm of ethnographic anecdote. When I began teaching a course on the anthropology of food in the late 1990s, I still had to answer the question, posed by students and colleagues, of what such a course could possibly be about. Roughly 10 years later, explanations seem no longer necessary, and I am faced with a surfeit of excellent choices for readings in a semester-long course. Over the past 20+ years, both the “anthropology of food” and “the senses” have exploded in terms of scholarly production (on the senses, see Howes 2003; and on the anthropology of food, see Mintz & Du Bois 2002, Holtzman 2006). Yet they have run largely on separate, parallel tracks, drawing from similar inspirations, but only occasionally intersecting in terms of extended ethnographic analysis or theoretical synthesis. Thus, this review takes up some of those intersections within a developing, rather than fully mature, field of inquiry—a field with many future possibilities.

## EARLY EXPLORATIONS

Although sensory aspects of food may have been mentioned in passing in anthropological accounts going back to Boas’s famed salmon recipes, discussion of food and the senses in anthropology is essentially inaugurated by Levi-Strauss and, later, Douglas. This is sensory anthropology in a structuralist key: Basic flavors and other sensory properties (e.g., temperature) are seen in binary oppositions that code for other important structural oppositions.

As Levi-Strauss put it, “They [the senses] are operators, which make it possible to convey the isomorphic character of all binary systems of contrasts connected with the senses, and therefore to express, as a totality, a set of equivalences connecting life and death, vegetable foods and cannibalism, putrefaction and imputrescibility, softness and hardness, silence and noise” (Levi-Strauss 1983 [1964], p. 153). Thus, each of the senses (Levi-Strauss assumes five here) are seen as codes that transmit messages. Interestingly, and in keeping with his interest in cooking as a basic prerequisite of the transition from nature to culture, Levi-Strauss (1983) argues that the “gustatory code” is privileged over the other sensory codes: Its message “is more often transmitted by the others than it is used to translate theirs” (p. 164). Douglas, similarly, draws our attention to the properties of food through a number of basic sensory contrasts that she sees related less to structures of the mind than to structuring meals and, through them, social identities. Contrasts such as sweet versus savoury structure the ordering of a meal, and the taste of sweetness works, by analogy, across meals to relate the everyday pudding (i.e., dessert) to the Sunday pudding or the holiday pudding (Douglas & Gross 1981, p. 11). Douglas gives attention not only to flavor, but also to texture, temperature, color, and other visual patterning elements, once again grouping them into sets of oppositions that structure particular meals and the relationship among different meals, noting, for example, that “the same recurring theme is visible in the sequence from thick gravy to thicker custard to solid icing sugar. One of the structural rules of this food system is progressive desiccation and geometrification of forms through the day” (Douglas 1982, p. 97).

Douglas thus presents an early possibility of taking into account multiple sensory dimensions of food. However, her work, like Levi-Strauss’s, is oriented toward abstracting binary patterns in sensory features that reflect other structured aspects of “the food system” and its relationship to “the social system”

(Douglas 1982), i.e., identifying degrees of intimacy and distance and identifying group boundaries (Douglas 1971; see Lalonde 1992 for a detailed critique). Furthermore, her sensory categories, like those of Levi-Strauss, are based on observation, not on informant descriptions or categories. She does suggest some potential cultural variability in the “degree of autonomy” of the rules of combining colors and textures in the food system (Douglas 1982, p. 110) in a particular society, but this angle remains largely speculative in her work.

Bourdieu’s highly influential *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) seems like it would be a fruitful avenue for getting away from some of the problems of structuralist abstraction and exploring the sensory aspects of eating, especially given his other work addressing questions of habitus and embodiment (Bourdieu 1990). Although Bourdieu does provide some examples of class-based taste, his analysis takes a wrong turn for our purposes in subsuming gustatory taste under the wider category of aesthetic taste as part of his theory of cultural capital. For Bourdieu, tastes “are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (1984, p. 56), “a system of classificatory schemes” (p. 174), or “the source of the system of distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence” (p. 175). It is only very occasionally and briefly in Bourdieu’s work that taste becomes “the faculty of perceiving flavours” (p. 474).<sup>1</sup> This subsumption of taste to distinction is an issue discussed by a number of writers as part

of a western tradition that specifically devalues taste (and smell) as a lower sense that promotes animal appetites rather than reasoned judgment and that blurs the basic western philosophic distinction between “subjective” and “objective” (Stoller 1989, p. 23; Howes & Lalonde 1991; Borthwick 2000).<sup>2</sup> Taste, then, becomes the capacity to distinguish and name, or categorize, flavors (and to make other aesthetic judgments), rather than an actual multisensory experience, which involves the dissolving of the object into the subject (Borthwick 2000, p. 135).

This latter process of tasting begins to be explored in two much-cited pieces, Stoller & Olkes’s “The Taste of Ethnographic Things” (1989) and Seremetakis’s essays in *The Senses Still* (1994), both meant as a critique or, better, a throwing down of the gauntlet in the face of mainstream anthropology’s lack of sensory awareness. Stoller & Olkes (1989) claim that the “tasteful fieldworker” will eschew the search for “deep-seated hidden truths” and instead “describe with literary vividness the smells, tastes and textures of the land, the people, and the food” (p. 29). They provide one such vivid description of Djébo, a Songhay woman—wife of a younger, unsuccessful brother—and the social frustrations, which she expresses in a sauce called *fukko boy*, that filled the anthropologists, as well as the other members of her compound, with disgust. The taste of the sauce, then, becomes a form of social action, a way of “express[ing] sensually her anger” (p. 22). It is, however, somewhat troubling that Stoller & Olkes oppose “analytical, theoretical” prose to “tasteful ethnographies [that] are descriptive, nontheoretical and memorable” (p. 32), thus confining the consideration of the senses to

<sup>1</sup>His discussion of food and eating, in which he argues that “the body is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes” (p. 190), is suggestive. He pays some attention to the material properties of food, noting that fish is a problematic food for working-class French men because it is “fiddly” and “totally contradicts the masculine way of eating” (p. 190). But in terms of sensory properties or perceptions, it is only the “lightness” of fish that is noted, or the greater interest for the middle classes in the “shape and color” rather than the “consumable substance” of food (p. 196). Thus everything is placed in the abstract oppositions of classification rather than the sensory fullness of experience.

<sup>2</sup>As Borthwick (2000), following Derrida, argues, “In Western thought the division of the senses into categories of objectivity and subjectivity allowed a dialectical process to lift and preserve the objective aspects of the senses to found conceptual knowledge and to devalue what it cancelled, since an immersion in subjectivity cannot found categories of conceptual knowledge. This is especially relevant to taste and smell” (p. 128).

the memorable evocative. In a subsequent article, Stoller & Olkes (2005 [1990]) substantially elaborate their description of the preparation of thin and thick sauces, looking into some of the flavor combinations and the ways that spice and other key ingredients are influenced by seasonality, regional differences, and economic considerations. They also contextualize Djébo's actions within a taste scheme that resonates with Douglas's, in which thin sauces typically express social intimacy and thick sauces formality and the social significance of meal events.

In some ways, Seremetakis's work parallels Stoller & Olkes's because the taste of food, in particular a peach, is used as a kind of revelatory moment (Fernandez 1986) to raise other questions about the senses in anthropology. However, Seremetakis moves considerably further in using this—and other ethnographic and self-reflexive vignettes of drinking a cup of coffee, gathering greens, memories of the tastes and smell of her grandmother's house in the country—to develop an analysis of the relationship of the senses to memory, materiality, modernity, and local epistemologies. She does not elaborate her approach with extended ethnography, but rather, it seems, means her work to be suggestive and provocative. For example, she argues that both material objects such as food and the sense organs (eyes, mouth, etc.) are seen in rural Greece as actively containing and revealing meaning beyond human intention and consciousness: “[T]he sensory is not only encapsulated within the body as an internal capacity or power, but is also dispersed out there on the surface of things as the latter's autonomous characteristics, which then can invade the body as perceptual experience” (Seremetakis 1994, p. 6). Although it is difficult to do justice to Seremetakis's approach in the space of a review article, it should be noted that Seremetakis is one of the first to raise a number of issues developed further below, including the relationship of food and the senses to memory, to synesthesia, and to place-making in the context of state regulatory regimes.

Another suggestive approach is provided by Mintz's extensive writings on sweetness (Mintz 1985, 1996). Although the body of Mintz's work focuses on the political economy of sugar, and he remains attentive to issues of chemical composition and nutritive value, he does not reduce sweetness to the biological, noting that a predisposition toward sweetness “cannot possibly explain differing food systems, degrees of preference, and taxonomies of taste—any more than the anatomy of the so-called organs of speech can ‘explain’ any particular language” (Mintz 2005 [1985], p. 113). Thus, in tracing the history of sugar in the west, specifically England, the United States, and the Caribbean, he includes extensive discussions of how the taste of sweetness, associated with sugar production, had a distinctive history that altered not only diets and meal practices, but also notions of time, gender and class, senses of self in relation to family, community and labor, and the “locus of desire” (1996, p. 79); indeed, Mintz sees it as at the heart of the European transformations that led to modern consumerist individualism. As he writes, “The first sweetened cup of hot tea to be drunk by an English worker was a significant historical event, because it prefigured the transformation of an entire society, a total remaking of its economic and social basis” (1985, p. 214). Mintz develops these ideas in tracing the relationship of sugar and sweetness to moral ideas. The addictive taste of sugar made it difficult to give up, and, thus, a contentious item of anti-slavery boycott, whereas its taste once again led commentators to suggest it would lead the working classes into idleness and women into other desires and illicit pleasures (1996, pp. 72–76).<sup>3</sup> The use of a particular flavor as a jumping off point for understanding society and its transformations dovetails in interesting ways with Seremetakis's work and also with the concept of “gustemology,” which I develop below.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Masquelier's (1995) discussion of the illicit pleasures associated with sugar and excessive sweetness as a commentary on contemporary consumption in Niger.

A final precursor to recent work, but one much less cited, is Kuipers's article, "Matters of Taste in Weyewa" (1993 [1984] reprinted in Howes 1991). A linguistic anthropologist, Kuipers explores some of the specific words for taste experience among the Weyewa of highland Sumba, noting a considerably greater diversity than those typical four or five, including words that he translates as "sticky," "soggy," "pungent," "beady," and "fresh." He also notes that many taste experiences do not have particular words except for source identifiers, e.g., "the taste of the mint plant" (1993, p. 545). Kuipers argues that taste terms are always embedded in social and multisensory contexts, making it difficult or pointless to study them in the abstract, as in the equivalent of a Munsell color chart.<sup>4</sup> Like Stoller & Olkes, Kuipers shows the ways that tastes are manipulated in host-guest situations so that bad tastes are used as a marker or as an act of refusal of social intimacy. He raises an important question of what social contexts allow for the use of taste terms, or the discussion of taste, because in Weyewa host-guest interactions it is not considered polite to talk about the taste of food (or other items such as betel and areca nut chew, which are given to guests) while one is consuming it, and any descriptive use of taste terms typically takes place only later, retrospectively. Kuipers also explores the metaphorical use of taste words in ritual contexts to talk about the propitiousness of certain objects and activities: a marriageable girl, or a plantable rice field, or a sacrificial animal are all described as bland to indicate their permissibility or bitter if they are impermissible. Here these taste terms seem partly to retain and partly to lose their connection to taste experiences because blandness is typically not seen as a good flavor for food, but it takes its meaning in this instance from its opposition to bitterness. The

<sup>4</sup>Indeed, he notes the frustration of some of the few early Torres Straits' researchers (Myers 1904), who complained that Melanesian "natives" could not "perform with accuracy the introspective task of labeling gustatory sensations" based on abstracted flavors such as sucrose, salt, and HCl (Kuipers 1993, p. 539). See also my discussion of synesthesia below.

notion of taste terms as descriptive of nonfood experience is further developed below.

These early works on taste, taken together, provide suggestive beginnings for some of the more recent work on food and the senses.<sup>5</sup> They suggest three potential directions for further ethnographic exploration and analysis: (a) the notion of food's sensory qualities as embodied forms of social distinction; (b) the possibility of analyzing a society's key flavor principles and oppositions in ways that suggest combinations different from the familiar salty, sweet, sour, and bitter; and (c) an approach in which taste is central to exploring other aspects of culture. How have these ideas been developed in more recent work?

## THE TASTE OF DISTINCTION

Beginning with Bourdieu (see also Goody 1982), a huge literature now explores food as a source and marker of social distinction, but relatively few authors analyze the ways that the senses play into these processes. Some notable exceptions do exist, however. Cowan's work on sweetness in Greece exemplifies the possibilities opened up by such a focus. At once a reflection on the obligatory nature of hospitality in Greece and on changing gendered spaces, Cowan's work is framed by an analysis of the ways that the sweetness of food takes on moral and gendered dimensions in everyday life and neighborly exchanges. Typical afternoon food offered by women to women visitors where Cowan worked in northern Greece includes a several-course delectation of chocolate, spoon sweets (fruits preserved in sugar water), heavily sweetened Turkish/Greek coffee, and a locally produced fruit-flavored liqueur called "the womanly drink" and served in "a richly adorned thin-stemmed glass [of] silver or crystal" (1991, p. 183). As Cowan argues, by ingesting sweet substances, "Sohoian girls and women

<sup>5</sup>Even archaeologists, with much less data at hand, have begun to explore the sensory aspects of food (see, e.g., Hamilakis 1999, Joyce & Henderson 2008, Outram 2007).

literally produce themselves as properly feminine persons. Consuming sweets, they do what they ‘should’ (observe the etiquette of guest-host relations) as well as what they ‘want’ (since they are thought ‘naturally’ to desire sweets), a conflation of moral propriety and desire that obscures the coercive aspects of such consumption” (p. 184). Cowan links sweet tastes with sweet feminine dispositions and salty ones with male dispositions, and power with pleasure, suggesting the difficulty of contesting such formulations both because of their “naturalness” and their seeming “triviality” (p. 181).<sup>6</sup>

Another example of hegemonic sensory regimes is Manalansan’s (2006) examination of racial and ethnic differences in the context of post-Fordist New York City. Manalansan does not look at tastes of pleasure, but rather at the ways that the smells of food are used to classify, denigrate, and self-exoticize Asian immigrants. While at some level paralleling other work on food and immigrant experiences, Manalansan extends our understanding by focusing on the ways that food smells are stigmatized by a presumed odorless<sup>7</sup> majority population. Odors become such powerful markers because of their sensory properties, in this case their lack of confinement: They do not stay put in kitchens, but mark houses and apartments, clothing and bodies, and thus potentially cross lines of private and public, even potentially marking immigrant neighborhoods as criminalizable as part of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s “quality-of-life” campaign. Thus, Manalansan (2006) notes the embarrassment of a Filipina immigrant at the unexpected visit to her home of her office supervisor after she had cooked *binagoongan*, a pork dish made with fermented shrimp paste: “She reasoned that, at work, she had maintained the respect of her colleagues

through a skillful accumulation of cultural capital, such as having fashionable taste in clothes, speaking seemingly unaccented English and the like. The unexpected visit virtually marked her as an FOB—an ignorant new immigrant “fresh off the boat”” (p. 46; compare Cantarero & Medina 2000, Jones 2000, Law 2001, Walmsley 2005). Here, notions of distinction and cultural capital, which may be treated as metaphors for taste, are linked to the actual smells of food in the negotiations of everyday life.

Whereas these approaches focus more on the hegemonic use of the senses, others have been interested in tracking the ways that sensory aspects of food do not have to conform to the hegemonic but rather can be releases or escapes from dominant sensory regimes, creating and re-creating identities through sensorily distinct experience and also often drawing on immigrant contexts for their studies. As part of what she calls an alternate “sensory geography,” Law (2001) describes the “smellscape” (compare Low 2005) of Filipina domestics in Hong Kong and how they turn certain public spaces into “sensory landscapes” through sharing home cooking at Sunday picnics in a public square (though watched over by security guards). In my own work on immigrant taste, I consider how alienated Greek migrants “return to the whole” (see Fernandez 1986) through the powerful experiences of taste and smell, encapsulated in such objects as a small vial of olive oil bought at a pharmacy in England (Sutton 2001).<sup>8</sup> In an interesting approach, Lee (2000) collects the stories of elderly first-generation

<sup>6</sup>On gendered tastes see e.g., Ritchie (1991, pp. 196–97), Reitz (2007), and a recent theorization of the topic by Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy (2008).

<sup>7</sup>Or “odor-superior.” Manalansan (2006) recounts how a Korean American realtor told his informant to “cook something American such as pot-roast, or even better, apple pie” prior to receiving prospective buyers (p. 47).

<sup>8</sup>A number of scholars have linked food to sensory memory in the context of migration and forced migration both as a balm against alienation and as an active promoter of protest/social change. See Ben-Ze-ev (2004), Choo (2004), Petridou (2001), and further discussion of synesthesia and memory below. One emergent theme is postsocialist nostalgia, showing that food can stand in for other time periods, not just distant places. See e.g., Dunn (2008) on how memories of Soviet tastes drive Georgians to risk botulism in producing their own version of Soviet canned goods, Caldwell (2006) on Soviet restaurant nostalgia, and Lankauskas (2006) on the food nostalgia evoked at a Soviet history museum in Lithuania.

Korean immigrants in Japan who want to eat spicy Kimchee, a strong marker of ethnic difference, but struggle with the gastric troubles it causes them. Lee recounts how one elderly Korean man was “almost apologetic” about his inability to withstand the spicy Korean dishes and his preference for the less spicy, “weaker” Japanese versions. The man explained that after so many years of living in Japan, perhaps his “tongue has changed” (p. 202; see also Ferzacca 2004). This is a rare article in exploring changes in sensory experiences of food, an issue I address further below.

### FOOD WORLDS: GUSTEMOLOGIES AND THE SENSES

Anthropologists and other scholars of food have often pointed out the ways in which food is central to cosmologies, worldviews, and ways of life. One interesting extension of such work is to focus on how taste and other sensory experiences of food can become central to such cosmologies, suggesting, in Howes’s (2003) formulation, culturally different balances of the senses. As Ritchie (1991), studying Hausa gustatory metaphors, puts it, “different cultures manifest different degrees of ‘analytic ability’ in different sensory modalities” (p. 192). Taking the lead from Feld’s notion of “acoustemology” (Feld 2000) I coin the term gustemology for such approaches<sup>9</sup> that organize their understanding of a wide spectrum of cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food. One intriguing example of such an approach is Farquhar’s *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (2002). Farquhar’s approach is to get at changing subjectivities in China from the Maoist to post-Maoist period. To do so, she develops the notion of a “flavorful temporal formation” as a way of exploring changes in seemingly natural dispositions, emotions, and sensory experiences. In particular, she focuses on the experience of flavors in contemporary

Chinese food and herb-based medicine. She says that the different flavors are seen as more than simply peripheral aspects of the medicine, the efficacy of which is found elsewhere; instead, “for a medicine to do anything very complicated it must assault the sufferer with a strong and complex flavor” (2002, p. 63). Thus, flavor has a causal force: “[S]weet herbals build up our overworked spleens” (p. 75).<sup>10</sup> And, “There is no quick, flavorless pill or injection but a whole technology of cooking, tasting and timing as patients wait to feel the results” (p. 70). She then applies these insights about taste to sociopolitical change. In focusing on the connection between bitterness and history, Farquhar describes the ways the concept of suffering in contemporary Chinese literature is termed “eating bitterness” (p. 63). As people experience their changing relations to others and to the Communist Party in relation to their experiences of bitterness, this taste, grounded in their everyday experience of flavor, easily moves between the personal and the political, the contemporary and their memories of “how much bitterness they or their family members have swallowed in the past” (p. 63). Farquhar, thus, does an impressive job of grounding people’s changing sense of themselves in relation to larger social forces through their everyday sensory experiences of flavor.<sup>11</sup>

I see Farquhar’s approach, despite obvious methodological differences, as similar to Mintz’s in focusing on the causal force of a particular flavor and the way this can be found at the very heart of our understanding of society and its transformations. It is interesting to note that Farquhar, like Mintz, focuses on a flavor that borders on the universal. Although she gives historical specificity to bitterness, the

<sup>10</sup>Compare Meigs (1984) and Seneviratne (1992) on the ways that food properties are seen to transfer to bodies in different cultural food systems. See also Anderson’s (1988) rich description of Chinese food categories.

<sup>11</sup>A number of shorter writings on India are suggestive of this kind of gustemological approach in which not just food but experiences of taste become central to wider experiences of subjectivity, politics, and or/cosmology (see e.g., Appadurai 1981, Pinard 1991, Khare 1992a, Seneviratne 1992).

<sup>9</sup>Apologies for the mixing of Latin and Greek here, but the strictly Greek “yevmology” would not resonate in English.

metaphorical uses of this flavor are instantly recognizable: Ingesting bitter food as a representative of bitter experience can be found in many societies and rituals, not the least of which being the Passover ceremony. The Haggadah makes clear, “These bitter herbs we eat, what is their meaning? Because the Egyptians made the lives of our forebears bitter in Egypt” (cited in Korsmeyer 2005). No doubt similar points could be made about some of the writings on sweetness discussed above. An example of a gustemological approach that challenges the basic tastes in a way similar to Kuipers’s is a suggestive piece by Weismantel (2005 [1994]) on the tastes *jayaj* and *mishqui* among the people of Zumbagua, Ecuador. While at first glance corresponding to bitter versus sweet, further examination reveals that *mishqui* can include foods that Weismantel characterized as salty or bland and are considered “tasty.” Weismantel shows how these tastes include sensory aspects, but also index male versus female foods, extradomestic versus domestic foods, and foods produced locally through subsistence agriculture versus foods produced through male travel. Like Farquhar, Weismantel (2005) is interested in social change and ties the visceral, sensory aspects of tastes to “the social and economic structures that make consumption possible” (p. 97).

Another approach to gustemology might be found in a number of writings that focus on the sensory aspects of food as part of constructions of senses of place or place-making projects. At a certain level, the attachment of taste to place can be seen as one of the tautologies of food and identity: As one Muscovite young woman explains to the anthropologist, “People from Russia like Russian tastes” (Caldwell 2002, p. 307). A number of recent works have begun to unpack these kinds of culinary/sensory sentiments. Trubek’s study *The Taste of Place* (2008), which explores the construction of the notion of *terroir* in France, provides the lead here. Trubek defines *terroir* as a “foodview,” i.e., a food-centered worldview. She shows how the concept of *terroir*—a taste that is typically naturalized and associated with a specific local place and associated practices

of production and consumption—was, in fact, produced by a particular history of social practices in France over the past two centuries, involving actors such as journalists, writers, chefs, artisans of various stripes, and changing infrastructure and practices such as tourism and rail travel (thus Trubek’s approach to taste recalls Mintz, as discussed above). Trubek also usefully contrasts the development of *terroir* in France with specific contexts in the United States (e.g., winemaking in California, niche farming in Vermont) and with an always-encroaching notion of modernity or globalization lurking in the background (compare Seremetakis 1994). Trubek’s is the most detailed ethnography of the institutions and practices that shape the ways that taste comes to define place and vice versa (but see also Demossier 2000, Leitch 2000, Leynse 2006, Paxson 2008, Walmsley 2005, and below).

Two innovative methodological approaches to the topic of sensory place-making are provided by Pink (2008) and Marte (2007). Pink takes her cue from phenomenology and from the Slow City movement, which she is studying in a Welsh town, to argue for a “slow ethnography” that involves forms of attention and thick description of the tastes and smells of local coffee shops, farmers’ markets, and other places that people walk through and share with others that she sees as “constitutive of place” (2008, p. 181; see also Lemasson 2006). Marte (2007) uses the seemingly more cognitively oriented concept of food maps in discussing the place experience—domestic, public, national, and transnational—of Dominicans and Mexicans in New York City. But she suggests ways to use mapping to explore not only the visual, but also multisensory dimensions of food experience, “mapping” different versions of favorite dishes, mapping side-by-side past and present kitchen spaces, as well as routes taken in search of particular ingredients: “For me, the beauty and productiveness of foodmaps resides in this capacity to encompass so many experiential, representational and geopolitical layers, and still allow one to focus on specific aspects of food relations” (p. 283). Marte’s foodmaps



would nicely complement Pink's reflexive phenomenology in providing a grounded ethnographic approach to the centrality of the senses in food-based place-making.

If work on *terroir* considers the production of taste through the agricultural production of food, a final suggestive gustemological approach comes from a focus on the production of taste in transforming the raw into the cooked, or the process of cooking in ethnographic works by Adapon in Mexico (2008) and Weiss in Tanzania (1996). Whereas Weiss largely takes his cue from Munn's (1986) concept of value transformations, Adapon adapts Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency (1998) to thinking about cooking, but both works are rare ethnographic treatments of the production of the sensory aspects of cooking as total social facts, or as Adapon (2008) puts it, "an all encompassing social activity" (p. 115; compare Weiss 1996, p. 118).

Weiss's approach is interesting because, while not ignoring other sensory aspects of food, he makes temperature, perceptions, and categorizations of hot and cold, and the different cooking processes involved in producing temperature, central to his understanding of the social life and value transformations of what he calls the "making...of the Haya lived world" (Weiss 1996, title page).<sup>12</sup> Weiss explores, for example, the different ways of cooking bananas (ripening by the hearth, roasting, boiling), both in terms of different notions of temperature and intensity, and how these differences are overlaid with spatial and temporal contrasts, as well as those of gender (men's bananas are cooked slowly by roasting, typically take a long time, and are part of extradomestic circulation). Hot and moist foods are highly valued and typically produced by women through the use of water, a substance associated with women's ability to

"enclose" and transform a "dynamic potential that is then deployed in cooking" (Weiss 1996, p. 89). These distinctions fan out into many domains of Haya sociality, including sexuality [hot spicy foods are said to excite sexual desire, and sexual heat, like cooking heat, can be intense or diffuse (1996, p. 97)], degrees of intimacy, and processes of commoditization [many "hot" foods are seen as commodities rather than domestic staples (133)]. By considering the sensory dimensions of cooking, then, Weiss shows how Haya objectify social values and "construct critical dimensions of themselves and the objective world they inhabit" (p. 126).

Adapon's study explores the agency of Mexican women (and some men) in producing socially valued *sazón* (flavor). Noting that a recipe simply provides a guideline, adjusted by mood and other social factors, she describes the sensory process of cooking as follows: "Ingredients are chosen, touched, and manipulated, assessed by sight, texture and smell, tasted and savored" (2008, p. 16). It is this complex process that makes for the claim that no two cooks ever produce the same flavor, even though they may follow the same recipe and were taught by the same person (p. 21). Adapon's approach becomes more than simply a sensory appreciation of cooking skill, but gustemological in her discussion of cooking as an artwork through which Mexican women's agency is expressed. Without unpacking the details of how Adapon applies Gell's theory and terminology of art to cooking, the author proposes that both the cook and the eater of a meal recognize through a Maussian transfer between people and objects the "social relational matrix surrounding the achievement of flavor and the development of cuisine" (p. 48). Flavor becomes a social agent in itself and food a "trap" (p. 48) through which women can exert power within families and in wider social networks.

## SYNESTHETIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Work on food and on the senses has usefully converged through the concept of synesthesia (also spelled synaesthesia), or the union of the

<sup>12</sup>Although categories of hot and cold were central staples of structuralist anthropology, often they were not connected in particular to food and not explored experientially but rather as cognitive categories characteristic of certain parts of the world [see Foster (1993) for a review in the context of his theory of the diffusion of humoral medicine].

senses. Synesthesia was implicit in a number of earlier approaches, and it draws into question the western five-sense model (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch), making it a useful jumping off point for thinking about other sensory categorizations. Synesthesia also blurs the objectivity and passivity of western sensory models by showing the ways that sensory experience is not simply passively registered but actively created between people.<sup>13</sup> Synesthesia is a reminder of why food and the senses should be considered together: As noted in my discussion of Kuipers, tastes are not separable from the objects being tasted. Bousfield's (1979) writing on the categorization of wine tastes is also a good reminder of this interrelatedness. He argues that when multiple senses and experiences (emotion, sexuality) are used as wine taste descriptors, it is not a matter of assigning names to discrete categories of taste perception: "What is actually happening is that new fields of relationships are being clarified within which a particular taste-experience can be located. The more such relationships can be established for some taste the more it can actually be characterized in its particularity" (1979, p. 201). Finally, synesthesia has been explored as a key to food memories through the notion that memory has multiple interacting sensory registers. These points are summed up by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1999): "From color, steam rising, gloss and texture, we infer taste smell and feel. . . . Taste is something we anticipate and infer from how things look, feel to the hand, smell (outside the mouth), and sound. . . . Our eyes let us 'taste' food at a

distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell" (p. 3).

Synesthesia is explored in a number of recent ethnographic works. In my own study of food memories in Greece (Sutton 2001), I looked at some of the ways that Kalymnian islanders employed explicit synesthetic metaphors ("listen to that smell") and valued implicit multisensory experiences (Orthodox ritual) in constructing narratives about foods past and making particular ordinary food consumption memorable. As Bousfield's discussion suggests, synesthesia is not a faculty, but rather a socially cultivated skill, developed in particular practices and linguistic devices. And food is often a vehicle for such synesthetic practices. Young (2005), for example, describes the social cultivation of taste-smell-color synesthesia among Pitjantjatjara of the Western Desert of Australia: "Women ask one another, as relatives, holding out an open palm, for a piece of the *kaputu*, the quid or ball of chewed *mingkulpa*, and the quid or part of it passes from mouth to mouth in a mutuality of greenness-taste-odour" (p. 61; compare Seremetakis 1994, p. 26).

A different approach to synesthesia is taken by Meneley. She explores one particular substance—olive oil—from the point of view of some recent approaches to materiality (particularly Keane 2003) to show how "the sensuous qualities of the olive oil itself. . . lend themselves to participate in larger schemes of value" (Meneley 2008, p. 308). She suggests that the nature of olive oil leads to "synaesthetic bundling," which has led to its use for rubbing on bodies (babies, Olympic athletes), preserving other foods, and taking on the flavors of various herbs and spices, as well as for anointing in Mediterranean religious practices: "Olive oil is a hybrid, sharing qualisigns of preservation that resonate in both the gustatory and spiritual realm" (2008, p. 316). Some of the characteristics of olive oil that she explores and elaborates include its luminosity, immiscibility, liquidity, permeability, cleansing, and warming properties. While recognizing the changing meanings of olive oil as well, especially in the current

<sup>13</sup>As Chau (2008, p. 490) rousingly writes, "The process of socializing cannot be done without human sensorial productions of noise, heat, taste, smell, spectacle, etc. (through speaking, shouting, singing, drumming, making music, blasting the speakers, honking, chanting, clapping, dancing, sweating, getting hot, embracing, caressing, cooking, feasting, toasting, bathing, smoking, perfuming, dressing, setting off firecrackers, lighting incense or candles, processing, engaging in games or battles, torturing, etc.). In other words, we sensorialize our world, especially through engaging in intense social activities."

connoisseurship of niche marketing (see Meneley 2007), she argues that starting from these sensory qualities of the oil we can understand why in many different times and places olive oil is not only good to eat, but good to think, and to practice spirituality.

Much of the work cited in this article is at least implicitly synesthetic, recognizing that food is not just taste and smell, but color, texture and temperature. But these explicit considerations of synesthesia remind us that it is both socially cultivated and produced and that some of the distinct material properties of food go beyond the categorization of any five-sense model.

## CHANGING TASTES

Whereas changing food habits and cuisines is a staple topic in food studies, once again the sensory aspects of changing tastes are ethnographically underexplored. Rozin & Rozin (2005 [1981]) have written suggestively about the forces of conservation versus boredom in tastes and the influence of socially shaped flavor principles in making innovations acceptable or unacceptable. However, their work is based on social psychology and lacks ethnographic elaboration. Studies of changing taste—while provocative—have, by and large, been speculative about large-scale trends (Haden 2005, Classen et al. 2005 [1994]) or focused on top-down mechanisms, such as official Soviet policies on luxury consumption (Gruknov 2005 [2003]) or Japanese corporate marketing efforts (Cwiertka 2000). Even some of the work discussed above, which takes a historical perspective on taste, tends to be far better at noting change or comparing different periods and to become most fuzzy when it comes to on-the-ground ethnographic observations of mechanisms of change. Wilk's (2006) work on Belizean food is suggestive of ethnographic possibilities, looking at the way Belizean migrant nostalgia and the opening of Belizean restaurants in U.S. cities create a concept of Belizean food in the United States, the taste for which was then imported back to

Belize itself: "Just like the brown sugar that had to travel to England for refining, Belizean cuisine was transformed into something much more respectable when the taste came back from abroad" (p. 179).<sup>14</sup>

Two interesting studies examine the role of restaurants in reshaping tastes. Klein (2007) shows how talk about Cantonese cuisine and basic flavor principles allows for the adaption of different ingredients, flavor elements, and regional styles and cooking techniques. Displaying some of the tensions of work on nationalism and the "invention of tradition," Klein argues that nonculinary factors such as regional status hierarchies in China and Hong Kong play a major role in reshaping restaurant food and covering over basic changes in tastes with claims of flavor continuities. Karaosmanoglu (2009), by contrast, shows how the taste of the past is incorporated in restaurants in Istanbul. The past in question is the Ottoman past, and Karaosmanoglu provides a fascinating contrast between high-end restaurants and taverns. In the high-end restaurants, historical research leads to the re-creation of Ottoman dishes, with tastes that customers greet with "astonishment" and "admiration" (p. 347), although these tastes have been somewhat tweaked (less cinnamon, less mixing of salty and sweet) to be acceptable to contemporary palates. In the taverns, by contrast, tastes from the past that have been handed down, apprentice-like from father to son, are preserved in "a modern, middle class setting" so that they will not be "forgotten" (pp. 353–54). Here changes in recipes are more about concerns with global discourses such as health, but in contrast to the high-end restaurants, Ottoman dishes "are defined through a historical continuation and through their

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<sup>14</sup>Wilk (2006, pp. 105–127) also lays out one of the most extensive schemes for interpreting the ways that foods are localized, describing processes such as "blending," "submersion," "compression," "alternation and promotion." Norton's (2006) work on cultural contact and change in indigenous and European chocolate consumption is suggestive for her focus on taste as sensory and not simply a mode of distinction.

sameness rather than difference. The past is *preserved* rather than *discovered*" (p. 354, emphasis in original). In some ways, this attitude toward the tastes of the past could be captured in Hobsbawm's (1983) distinction between "custom" and "tradition," although Karaosmanoglu sees active invention in both cases.

Finally, a promising approach can be detected in ethnographic studies of the process of taste enculturation, both for children and in niche-marketing/slow-food initiatives. Terrio (2000, p. 40) shows how various French government and food-marketing sources work to reeducate French palates in the proper tasting of chocolate.<sup>15</sup> In particular, Terrio shows how seminars on palate education rely on a wine-tasting model that rewards a vocabulary of distinctions and objectify the five-sense view of perception before suggesting that all the senses come into play in the appreciation of chocolate. What is missing from Terrio's ethnography is how the participants in such a seminar actually take up or refuse such palate retraining. This is where Leynse's work (2006, 2009) with French school children is potentially helpful. Leynse shows the different key settings—classroom, kitchen, dinner table, as well as class trips to vineyards and produce farms—where French children learn cooking skills, skills for talking about food, and the particular categories and modes of sensory appreciation of food. However, she does not see this teaching as a passive enculturation; instead, relying on phenomenological and anthropological approaches to apprenticeship, she indicates some of the ways that these children act back, both through "mistakes and missteps" (2009, p. 15), and potentially incorporate other, contradictory influences in developing practices of taste.

## CONCLUSION

Given the worldwide profusion of TV cooking shows, globalized products and ongoing

debates about relocalizing food, commoditization of taste distinctions at Starbucks, and even widely reported "new" tastes such as *umami*, it is not surprising that the sensory aspects of food are receiving increased attention in academic scholarship. And although this celebration of food is to be lauded, it should also keep us aware of the politics and economics of food and the potential for our research to fall prey to "Epicureanism" (Holtzman 2006, p. 364). In pursuing our interest in the sensual aspects of food, we should keep our multisensory apparatuses trained on what anthropology has in one way or another always been concerned with: everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value. In reviewing the literature for this article, it was striking to me that we have moved a long way, theoretically speaking, from the problems of structuralism and other Cartesian approaches to mind and body and outworn dichotomies between the material and the symbolic. The deployment of recent, intertwining approaches from the anthropology of the senses, phenomenology, materiality studies, and theories of value, among others, provides exciting opportunities for rich ethnographic elaboration. And the focus on sensory aspects—experienced like few other things both inside and outside of bodies (and transformed in the crossing of bodily boundaries)—means that these approaches have much to gain from an engagement with food. But our theoretical progress has yet to be matched by any corpus of rich ethnographies that make the sensory aspects of food central to an understanding of lives and experiences; many of the writings on this topic remain in the form of short, suggestive articles or snippets of ethnography in larger works on other topics. In this review I suggest some of the ways that food and the senses could become central ethnographic foci in their own right. Much, indeed, remains to be done.

<sup>15</sup>See also Demossier's (2005) ethnography of wine tasting and the creation of wine expertise in France.

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