

## **Introduction: Questions of Taste**

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Volume 7 of *intervalla, Questions of Taste*, sets out to examine taste from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. The current volume thus collects input from scholars who develop notions and understandings of taste ranging from gustatory sensations to quality appreciation, from dietary health to craft beer preference, from canned meat to curry, and from design furniture to fast fashion. We are pleased to have brought together a broad range of geographical and disciplinary points of departure, ones that build upon and sometimes take issue with the shared foundation of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu's analysis of taste reminds us that formation of taste is a social and cultural process; the articles collected here look at how the individual at once contributes to and becomes a product of this dynamic, evolving process.

Today there exists an overwhelming amount of information about diverse and divergent tastes, and we note that hierarchies of taste have come to play an important role in how we understand taste and ourselves. We know we all have certain tastes, and that some are more valued than others. As Parkhurst Ferguson (2004) explains: "many of us in fact spend a good deal of time accounting for taste...Hierarchies govern taste. Every social setting prizes certain tastes and disdains others, and food is no exception" (p. 19). As Blumer (1969) reminds us, tastes and more generally fashion, apply to all different social arenas from clothing and arts to food and sciences, and should be looked at as a dynamic social process, which suggests that certain hierarchies of taste exist in a given moment but what is considered as "a good taste" or "in fashion" constantly changes as a collective social function. With the expansion of social media broadcasting our tastes, what we like, what we claim to like, what we should like, and what we consume, the practice of "good taste" has gone from the local and physical to the global and virtual, implying the complex nature of audience. This means that the communication process of our tastes, particularly the symbolic meanings associated with certain objects and experiences we consume (from food, fashion, to lifestyle), is also increasingly complex; the information we obtain and share as well as the nature of social interactions that occur via social media play a critical role in shaping the trends and the standard of tastes locally, globally, and glocally. Furthermore, such meanings are in constant flux. The articles included in this volume invite the reader to take a step back and consider how taste expresses community within and across national borders, how it determines behavior, from an individual's beer of choice to broad patterns of consumer consumption, and how the media influence such expressions and consumption.

As Jeremy Strong (2011) explains in the introduction to *Educated Tastes*: "Questions of taste intrude into almost every act of selecting, combining, and positioning that we perform, particularly in a consumer society where we are as likely to be defined by what we wear, drive, eat, and drink as by our politics, beliefs, and jobs" (p. ix). This notion of performance connects all of the articles in the volume, as each with its own focus explores how individuals and community groups perform their tastes, preferences, and lifestyles. All of these performances play against the background of social media, moving local encounters to the global stage. Considering the performative aspect in formation of tastes also highlights the aforementioned nature of audience and social interactions that complicates the sense-making process that surrounds the question of taste.

Vaughn Bryan Baltzly's article, "The Interpersonal Variability of Gustatory Sensation and the Prospects for an Alimentary Aesthetics" delves into how individuals perceive and perform taste. He asks what we mean when we talk about our tastes in food, how we know that we are all talking about the same thing, and how we account for the inevitable variability in understanding. His essay, building off of Carolyn Korsmeyer and Alexandra Longue's research on the psychology and philosophy of taste, argues that given the possibility of measuring interpersonal differences regarding taste and the current lack of shared vocabulary to communicate these tastes, we should be able to fine tune our language choices so as to delineate both non-flavor and flavor-related dimensions of taste and smell. However, the possibility of this heightened performance of taste means that it is likely that we can never arrive at a common gustatory aesthetic.

Chris Fink investigates how the notion of gustatory aesthetic influences our expectations of individuals and their respective communities. In “Taste and the Nomethetic Diet,” Fink takes issue with the US Dietary Guidelines for Americans, guidelines that never include a mention of taste, pleasure, or enjoyment in the creation or promotion of a healthy diet. Nonetheless, individuals and their communities build their dietary habits around taste and enjoyment, thus creating a disparity between recommendations and practical outcomes. Fink turns to P. Falk’s notion of “good to think” vs. “good to eat” as it applies to food choices and dietary behaviors to help us reconsider how guidelines might function. Through the use of his university’s work with the local community in the Cooking Matters® program, Fink demonstrates how “good to think” and “good to eat” are notions loaded with cultural influences, biases, and assumptions, ideas that are worth unpacking as we consider what different groups and communities value in their food choices. Further, both university students and local community members may perform the “good to think” ideas expected of them when it comes to a healthy diet, prioritizing what they assume to be healthy over what they demonstrably prefer when it comes to taste.

Maya Dodd and Arundhati Ail move our examination of taste to India, applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of taste to the hierarchy embodied by the Indian caste system. “Understanding Taste in India: Social Systems to Digital Spaces” discusses the political underpinnings of food and eating in India. After examining the rules and classifications of food according to the caste system and religious dogma, the authors look to Appadurai’s fundamental work on cookbooks in India as a means to nationalize and standardize Indian regional cuisines. Cookbooks thus produced a homogenized version of curry, one that catered to the colonial English-speaking (and literate) elite. Their article then moves from the cookbook to the virtual realm of the blogosphere, one that should, at least in theory, create spaces for less-represented regional cuisines. In practice, however, blogs and social media also cater to the social elite, leaving little room for oral histories of the less enfranchised.

Taste applies, of course, to drink as well as food, and the next articles in the collection examine the US beer market, the rise of craft beer, and the sharing and performing of the taste of beer via social media. Martin Stack’s article, “From Bland to Grand: Path Creation and the Rise of Craft Beer,” looks at how the US moved from the consistent but arguably tasteless brews made famous in the twentieth century in their regular and light forms to a veritable smorgasbord of craft beer selections with local and regional affinities. Stack uses the path dependency model to highlight the role of history and the influence of normalizing factors like industry standards to explain the rise of the bland, American beer. He then explains path creation narratives and how their accounts “highlight the process of mindful deviation” from earlier American beer tales. They replace the national with the regional, and in the process, offer a whole new taste panorama, focusing on the consumption rather than the production. Delving further into the mystique of craft beers and the change in American taste, Colleen Myles et al. investigate how social media records and shapes the taste for craft beer. Their article, “Virtual Pub Crawl: Assessing the Utility of Social Media for Geographic Beer Research in the United States,” consider how social media serves to aggregate tastes and how it may help researchers explore personal consumer preferences related to taste. Their study looks at the geographic footprint of different beer labels on BeerAdvocate and Twitter so as to examine the different data sets for trends regarding taste and consumption. They ask whether big data can help us better understand beer tastes and beer culture, and whether the discussion of beer on social media sources may then influence the consumer and questions of taste.

The final article of the collection moves away from food and drink and squarely into the area of personal taste with regard to national stereotypes. In his article, “Nørdic-ness: Perception and Positionality of Scandinavian Taste as Good Taste,” Milton Fernando Gonzalez-Rodriguez explores how notions of Nørdic-ness are conflated with definitions of good taste in consumer goods associated with Scandinavia. In particular, Gonzalez-Rodriguez looks at how brands cultivate and capitalize such associations through their promotional materials, and how consumers

perform this understanding in their purchasing of goods associated with Scandinavian lines, from Bang & Olufson to COS. He looks at qualities stressed by Nordic companies, specifically timelessness, simplicity, and functionality, all characteristics that we associate with the Scandinavian ethos. Gonzalez-Rodriguez also reminds us that taste goes beyond our gustatory habits and preferences, shaping who we are as individuals, communities and nations.

All told, the articles brought together here help us begin to rethink how discourses of taste are articulated and recorded, and they highlight how we perform to define our taste and how these discourses change across cultures. This volume of *intervalla* thus helps the reader to reimagine the parameters of taste across disciplinary and national boundaries. We can conclude that the more we learn about taste, from the gustatory to consumer goods, the more we learn about patterns of behavior for individuals and communities. Or, to paraphrase Brillat-Savarin, tell us your tastes, and we will tell you what you are. As the articles remind us, however, our tastes are not static, but instead, open to change, suggesting the importance of continuing to reflect upon the various cultural and sociological issues that surround tastes. Furthermore, the role of media technologies that produce big data and utilize algorithms started to play an indispensable role in the formation of tastes (Barile & Sugiyama, 2015) as well as a broader cultural production and practices (Striphas, 2015), which we also find in this collection. Thus, as the title of this volume “Questions of Taste” suggest, questions of taste remain open, calling for sustained research attention in the years to come.

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