Taste and the Nomothetic Diet

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ABSTRACT
Dietary health promotion often lacks reconciliation between population-level nomothetic nutritional guidance and the ideographic application of such information in a wide range of populations. While some global dietary guidelines include pleasure and enjoyment in their recommendations, the United States *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* lacks any direct mention of these factors in promoting a "healthy" diet. Despite this, taste and palatability are often identified as key drivers in food choice, indicating support for Brillat-Savarin's oft-cited and long-standing contention that taste "...invites us by pleasure to repair the losses which result from the use of life." In the time since, the exploration of taste in relation to food has included aesthetic judgement and discernment, cultural pressures, exclusivity, and anxieties around body image and health, in addition to physiological/sensory aspects. Over the past five years, we have directed a community food education program in Central Ohio using the Cooking Matters® curriculum. Because Cooking Matters® classes are facilitated by undergraduate students who often come from a different socio-economic background than program participants, tensions around class identity, individual and group conceptions of health, and sensory judgements of food have often come to light. This essay seeks to explore these tensions in light of theoretical constructs of taste.

KEY WORDS
Taste, Dietary Guidelines, Food Insecurity, Dietary Health

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MISSING TASTE

The link between human dietary behavior and taste remains inextricable, and yet the world of dietary health promotion has struggled to incorporate the concept in any meaningful way into the realm of dietary recommendations, perhaps in part because of the nomothetic nature of such work. Dietary recommendations such as the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020* are intended to provide guidance for policies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as to inform the work of health professionals. The guidelines even state, in clear language, that the document is not intended for the general public (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015). Despite this stated purpose, the guidelines are applied directly to the general pubic in programs and policies across the nation, thus impacting food access, availability, and beliefs in important ways. In a time when dietary guidelines and nutrition policy are at the forefront of consumer consciousness and food marketing efforts (Turnwald & Crum, 2018), it seems essential to consider the realm of taste when creating such far-reaching strategies. Despite that, the word *taste* appears nowhere in the 144-page document, and related concepts such as flavor, palatability, and enjoyment appear only indirectly and rarely. This paper demonstrates the tensions around taste and nomothetic guidelines, and how these tensions can be both illuminated and lessened with the exchange of experiences and ideas across class, age, and cultural divisions.

THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF TASTE

Academic consideration of taste has been longstanding and cross-disciplinary, with realms that exist far outside of the study of food. As one can imagine, the exploration of taste within food includes biological, socio-cultural, and aesthetic considerations, among others. Brillat-Savarin (1854) famously divided taste into three forms, including the physical apparatus of flavor sensation, the ability of various elements we consume to arouse a sensation of flavor, and the sensation of flavor itself (Jackson, 2015). He poetically (and poignantly) described two purposes for taste which hold substantial weight even today. The first suggested that taste invites us to use pleasure to repair the losses inflicted by life's demands, and the second that it assists us in choosing among all of the "alimentary" elements of nature (Brillat-Savarin & Robinson, 1854). More recently, and particularly in western societies, sensory taste is discussed in categories – with five basic tastes (sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami) having been identified through standard positivist, reductionist, experimental and quasi-experimental means. Other societies (Indian, Chinese, Japanese) and theorists (Hay, Kunz & Kaminski) have approached taste more holistically, and have identified further categories of sensory taste using phenomenological and constructivist approaches (Wertz, 2013). While these are relatively objective considerations of taste, each is interpreted subjectively – as perception and interpretations are individual and varied.

Beyond the objective sensory and gustatory nature of taste that underlies Brillat-Savarin's musings, cultural debates around taste as judgement and preference abound. Even as far back as the 1700s, philosophical debates about aesthetic judgement and standards were ongoing and considered the tension between individual preferences and societal standards of taste (Jackson, 2015). Societal pressure continues to influence choice in this realm. For instance, societal pressures to appreciate fine wines, or expensive cheeses often clash with personal preferences around these products. Further, among a range of societal strata (SES, ethnicity, religion, etc.), standards for taste can vary, and can come into tension with individual preferences. Some might expect a wealthy financier to order an expensive cut of meat at dinner, and if she were to order a hot dog and fries (because of her preferences), it could be a shock for her dinner companions (because of societal standards and expectations). Further, our choices around food can embody our place in society – providing externally viewable "evidence" about our societal standing, and our identity.

These societal standards not only vary among social strata, but also vary over time and

across cultures. As fads and trends change, so do standards. While being a connoisseur of India Pale Ales could have been considered a rarity and a sign of elevated social standing and refined taste in the 1990s, the proliferation of IPAs in today's American beer landscape makes this a much more common occurrence, and perhaps less of a bellwether of social standing. When foods or drinks seem unattainable to some strata of society, the exclusivity of those foods can be a marker of high social standing at the top levels. As proliferation occurs, the social standing marker can erode. Now trends change so quickly that some have suggested that diversity of food preferences and experiences (instead of exclusivity) may be the hallmark of refinement. This lack of exclusivity in choice still breeds a societal stratification in taste through the search for simple, global flavors and cultural authenticity. Since individuals with fewer financial resources to travel or explore wide ranges of foods may have less change to gain cultural capital in experiences and knowledge relative to taste, they are left out of this climb up the ladder of social hierarchy (Jackson, 2015; Johnston & Bauman, 2007; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

It is useful to consider here the notion proposed by Falk that food can be considered both "good to think" and "good to eat" (1991, p. 758). The former consideration is related to the societal propensity to treat food as good or bad, and right or wrong. Depending on the ideology at hand (health, environment, social justice, social class), foods can be classified along a range of continua of good/right, or bad/wrong in this regard. The latter consideration is related to the pleasure of eating – specifically the individual preferences around sensory experiences of tasting foods, and the preference of appreciation of their flavors. Falk's dual conception is another helpful framework for considering the dynamics of taste, and can be useful in considering that both the "good to think" and "good to eat" can have objective and subjective influences and manifestations. In other words, whether we are considering the ideologies of our food, or experiencing and reflecting upon the flavors of that food, social standards and individual perceptions are at work in determining our taste. Something can be "good to think," but subjectively not "good to eat," such as a locally grown beet (environmentally responsible, healthy) but still not considered tasty for certain people. Because taste preferences change, one could argue that the "good to think" ideologies can influence our subjective taste preferences, as is the case for those who grow to appreciate and enjoy foods to which they were formerly averse.

Regardless of the framework we use to examine taste, our personal and collective experiences play a role in determining them. Perullo (2016) suggests that taste is "ecologically situated" (p. 9), meaning that taste experiences draw from a relationship between the individual doing the tasting, the food itself, and the societal context. But, what are the experiential routes into the arena of taste? Perullo (2016) once again suggests three experiential pathways to taste – through pleasure, knowledge, and indifference. The pleasure and knowledge pathways link back to Falk's conceptions of "good to eat" and "good to taste," respectively, but what about the indifference pathway? Considering indifference in food experiences allows us to understand that neither every taste experience is fully mindful, nor is every person going to attend to taste experiences in the same way or to the same degree every time they eat. This is especially important to consider when discussing educational experiences around food, which the following sections will do.

Inside of the knowledge pathway, the "good to think" conceptualization, and the societal standards realm of taste exists the influence of a rise in nutritionism on dietary behaviors in the U.S. today. Scrinis (2015) describes nutritionism as the societal obsession with health-related nutritional guidance, and particularly the overriding focus on reductionist nutrients instead of broader food pattern guidance (such as eating more plant-based foods). This approach, Scrinis suggests, has led to decreased focus on the more holistic and nuanced relationship between food and the body, and I would suggest, the broader absence of taste in current nutritional guidelines. This focus on utilitarian aspects of food has even been demonstrated to effect consumer evaluations of taste and preference. Huang & Wu (2016), who found that individuals with a higher pleasure orientation (hedonic food perspective) evaluated food with a healthy name as tastier than those with a lower pleasure orientation (utilitarian food perspective). Conversely, the more

utilitarian participants rated the unhealthy food as significantly more tasty and appealing than those with the hedonic perspective. This indicates that in certain cases, a utilitarian, reductionist perspective on food predisposes individuals to perceive unhealthy options as more delicious than those individuals with a hedonic, pleasure-oriented perspective. This can be culturally and contextually grounded, however, as research has shown in France, where healthy food is often associated with good flavor, and unhealthy food with bad flavor (Werle, Trendel, & Ardito, 2013). Even in the United States, however, marketing healthy foods using taste has shown a significant sales advantage over marketing toward healthiness (Turnwald & Crum, 2018).

PROGRAMMING TASTE AND HEALTH

In an attempt to address some of the disconnect between taste and dietary health, a range of food- and cooking-focused programs exist in communities around the country. Some are developed at the local level, and others, such as Cooking Matters®, are developed, updated, and administered at the national level. Cooking Matters® aims to focus the conversation on food, cooking, and conviviality with a target to reduce food insecurity, particularly among families and children (Share Our Strength, 2019b). At the core of Cooking Matters® is a free, 6-week course where participants (adults, families, and/or kids) spend 2 hours learning about healthy eating, budgeting, shopping, and meal planning, and then cook a meal together. Participants also receive free groceries to take home so that they can prepare the recipe from class for their families. This is a key part of the program, because participants often experience the impact of food insecurity, and thus don't often have the margin in their food budget to prepare an unsuccessful (thus uneaten) recipe at home. Cooking Matters® programming can also include one-time demos and classes at farmers markets, food pantries, and other community resources, as well as grocery store tours.

At our institution, we have been offering Cooking Matters® programming in our local community for over 5 years, as part of the health promotion and nutrition curricula. We partner with a regional non-profit for support and data management, as well as Share Our Strength, the national non-profit that developed and administers the Cooking Matters® initiative. Our institution is a residential, undergraduate-only, liberal-arts university with a strong history of community service. As a health-focused department, we are aimed at providing students with an evidence-based foundation, opportunities for students to apply their learning to both themselves and their community, and leadership opportunities that foster the application and reflection cycle that is so critical to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Cooking Matters® provides many opportunities to engage in this cycle in student roles that range from coordinating the program, grant-writing, instruction (we call this facilitation), and logistics. Students in both the health promotion and nutrition programs rotate through roles in the Cooking Matters® program during their time in the department, and have described the program as transformative and edifying, particularly when it comes to their academic and professional options after graduation.

In the time since we began offering Cooking Matters® in our community, we have had over 2,000 participants take part in one of our classes, demonstrations, or tours. All of these participants have come from the city in which the University is located, or the broader county. The program is connected to the community health improvement plan, which directs the local public health department and community partners toward progress on health needs in the community. In summary, the Cooking Matters® initiative at our institution is enmeshed in the curriculum, the departmental learning objectives, and the local public health system. We feel strongly that this type of thoughtful linkage between higher education and the community is at the leading edge of the future of the liberal arts, and provides exceptional opportunities for our students as future professionals.

The curriculum itself attempts to focus nutritional discussion not on nutrients and reductionist principles, but on foods that help individuals reduce their risk for chronic disease. Each week has a recipe at the center of the lesson, and several nutrition and planning/budgeting

concepts on which we focus. For instance, one week may focus on the dietary benefits of whole grains, and that focus will be reflected in activities around identifying and selecting whole grain foods at the store, discussing whole grain substitutions that participants would be willing to try given their taste preferences, cultural context, and budget. In one of our more memorable classes, a group of women with food traditions from Central America were thrilled to have discovered (and tasted) barley in class, and used it at home in some of their traditional foods – with great success. They described that the taste and texture was a good fit for their family – who didn't enjoy the brown rice and other whole grain options they had tried previously. We aim to focus very intentionally on taste, not trying to dictate the tastes of our participants, but rather exploring *with* them the things they like and dislike, and trying to find a fit for their individual taste preferences.

To foster this food-centric (and taste-oriented) dialogue, we use a facilitated dialogue approach to teaching. Briefly, features of this approach include the recognition that learners have deep expertise in their own life contexts, and builds upon having a safe space where participants and instructors can share and compare their life experiences around the issues being discussed in class (Share Our Strength, 2019a). Aside from the clear learning benefits for our participants, this approach also allows our student instructors to move away from the "sage on the stage" role that they often assume regarding teaching, and into an empathetic and engaged listener and facilitator. This is simultaneously a relief for them (because our participants are often much older with more life experience), and a challenge (because it requires flexibility and close engagement). Further, it brings into relief the variance in life experiences that we often find between our participants and our student instructors. Our students come from a range of SES, racial, ethnic, and other social strata, and the life experiences of our participants are often quite different from those of our students.

TASTE, ASSUMPTIONS, SOCIAL STRATA

Our students and the participants each enjoy the interactions and the ideas that are shared, but now and then the tension between ideas about taste and nutrition are revealed in the perceptions and assumptions of both groups. A few instances serve to illustrate this point. First, in a summer lunch program at a local school, we had scheduled a weekly "taste education" event where our Cooking Matters® team would present a range of foods within a category (fruits, cheeses, vegetables, grains, etc.) and the children would talk with us about which foods they liked, why they liked them, what flavors and textures they were sensing, and more. Children would vote for their favorites, and we would tally the votes and come back next week with an update of their favorites. My colleague and I challenged the students to include foods that would challenge their palates a bit. For instance, during the week of cheese tasting, we included not only mild cheddar and mozzarella cheeses, but brie and a few other sharper cheeses. While we recognized that the children and their families may not be able to access all of these foods, we tried to keep the range of options affordable and not select anything that would be far outside of budget constraints. The children selected a sharp cheese as their favorite that week, surprising all of the students and instructors in our program. In fact, the students were hesitant to include these cheeses because of their assumptions about the palate and taste preferences of the children, based on both their age and perceptions of their experiences and opportunities. My students made similar assumptions about the children throughout the summer, only to be confronted with results that broke their expectations. Another example occurred during a week where we had various types of canned meat products for the children to taste and describe. Our instructors assumed that the children would not like these foods, because in their opinion they were neither "good to eat" nor "good to think." However, the children likely had different experiences with canned meat in their home lives, and many enjoyed a range of the selections. My students were surprised at this, but also felt justified when the children didn't like the canned meat. This is in stark contrast with a week where various vegetables were offered, and when children didn't like certain options, my students

encouraged them to keep trying them, asserting that they might eventually like them. It seems that when foods are "good to think," it is easier to justify encouraging the changing of tastes, where foods that are not "good to think" are not encouraged – despite the reality that "good to think" is loaded with cultural, ideological, and contextual influences. We talked often with the student instructors about their assumptions, and the biases that lead to them, and while I believe that there were fewer assumptions at the end of the 10 weeks, the tensions between the expectations of my students and the subjective, ideographic, varying tastes of the participants still remained.

In another instance, in a 6-week course focused on adult participants, both our students and the participants made interesting assumptions about each others' taste preferences. In a lesson focused on both increasing vegetable intake and using a flexible recipe "framework" for cooking, students wanted to avoid using tofu and peanut sauce because they felt that the participants would be resistant to trying these foods. In the end, these ingredients were included. And, much to the surprise of our students, the favorite dish of the class (with little exception) was the stir fry dish that used the tofu and peanut sauce. Conversely, in the same class, our participants made assumptions about foods that our student instructors (me included!) would and would not enjoy – particularly focused on perceived "unhealthy" and "processed" foods like frozen pizza and pop tarts. They were surprised (and delighted) to learn that many of us also enjoy frozen pizza and pop tarts, and because our approach is focused on patterns and not individual foods, we were not admonishing them for these preferences.

There have been other instances of misguided assumptions – from my students assuming that our participants have experienced specialty foods with a "health halo" (Schuldt, Muller, & Schwarz, 2012) such as pomegranate, quinoa or amaranth; to assumptions about the presence (or absence) or cooking equipment, such as a slow cooker or a blender, in participants' kitchens. While these assumptions aren't directly taste-oriented, they flow into the experiential avenues of taste, by both decreasing the direct experience of tasting certain foods, to developing a societal "expectation" around particular foods, based on their perceived refinement and link to social class. These tensions reinforce societal boundaries, even in the midst of dialogue focused on navigating the differences. Indeed, both our Cooking Matters® team and our participants are not only discussing objective, sensory taste relative to the foods in our class, but we're also negotiating and navigating subjective, societal taste, and broadening our exposure and experiences together. It is no wonder that the ideographic application of nutritional guidelines is rare – it takes real work and dedication to navigate!

TASTE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

These illustrations attempt to demonstrate the complexity of taste, and how ideologies and experiences around taste can clash across social strata. They also attempt to illustrate some of the tensions in the descriptions of taste that were explored earlier in this paper. If we are to repair the losses of life through taste, as Brillat-Savarin (1854) implores, perhaps we need to recognize the many dimensions of taste in the process of doing so. Even if we provide ample opportunity for experiences as routes into taste – through pleasure, knowledge, and even indifference, it is important to recognize that taste is also loaded with societal expectations and standards, which can both aid in forming individual taste preferences, and also come into conflict with them.

In our case, we are treading the murky waters of embedding taste within a rhetorical landscape focused on reductionist nutritional principles. We're using Perullo's (2016) notion of experience around pleasure and knowledge as an avenue into these discussions, and coming face-to-face with objective, societal norms around which food is "good to think," (Falk, 1991) when our student instructors *and* our participants each reveal their assumptions about the other. When we break through those assumptions, and have a chance to discuss food on a subjective, ideographic level, we reach outcomes that move beyond objective, societal conceptions of taste,

and our participants can find solutions that meld the best evidence regarding dietary health with the myriad of individual cultural, sensory, and economic realities. Examples of this level of success abound, from the example used earlier of barley as a substitution in Latin American recipes, to the range of participants who have experienced new flavors and textures and built them into their family's food landscape. Perhaps in the future, dietary guidelines will consider the range of both subjective and objective aspects of taste, and find ways to encourage dialogue that facilitates an ideographic approach to dietary health, and the application of evidence-based dietary guidance within the experiential ecology of taste development. As one of our young Cooking Matters® participants once said, "I didn't think I'd like this, but I did. It makes me wonder what other things I might like if I tried them." Taste is important, and can be a great way to foster dialogue, break the cycle of nutritional reductionism, and bring together people from a range of backgrounds, beliefs, and life experiences.

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BIOGRAPHY

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