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rich pickings

CAROLYN KORSMEYER (ED)

The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink

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My dinner party piece (shaped from a fragment of memory that I've also written about elsewhere) is a performance of a dreary winter spent in England: 'It was London in the year 2000 ... threats of BSE, salmonella and foot and mouth ... a faltering Australian dollar and a buoyant English pound ... damp days made memorable by a local café's lunch special—vegetable tikka baguette ...'. You can imagine the rest. However, the point of including this fragment here is not to mount an assault on British industrial cooking or to flaunt an irritating (post)colonial defiance, claiming multicultural superiority. Instead, I am curious about the taste of homesickness and longing—unexpected hauntings of coconut milk, chilli, galangal and lemongrass on the tongue. For in England, I was homesick not for iconic Anglo-Australian foods (forget Vegemite and Anzac biscuits, and Violet Crumble Bars with their chocolate-honeycomb textures) but for distinctive tastes of a borrowed foodway (remember *laksa* instead). The imagined presence of this dish—Chinese rice-flour noodles blended with Malay spices, its origins in the Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore—produced depths of yearning that, even now, seem almost inexplicable.

Cultural writing on the literal and symbolic meanings of taste should have much to offer, analytically speaking, for appeasing nagging memories like these. Carolyn Korsmeyer's edited collection, *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, is a case in point. Ambitious in scope, this collection of thirty-seven contributions and eight thematic sections, each section with an editorial preface, explores the

‘taste’ of eating and drinking in its many and varied resonances—taste as ‘shorthand for the experience of flavour in all its dimensions’ (3), as ‘subjective ... yet shared’, as ‘fleeting’ yet remembered, as ‘transient experiences freighted with the weight of history’. (8) Meanwhile, as Korsmeyer and others from this collection remind us, this specific focus on taste cultures (and related cultures of smell) is, in itself, unusual. It works ‘against the grain’ of traditional (Kantian) privileging of vision and hearing in hierarchies of the senses—a form of privileging, I suspect, that continues to be played out in the field of popular culture, its typical analytic ‘objects’ (music, sport, film, fashion) approached as ones primarily to be seen and heard, and only occasionally known through touch. This is in contrast to those other ‘objects’ (food, drink, cooking, eating, travel, place) that, in a more visceral sense, perhaps, are identified as ones to be tasted, smelt and ingested as ‘meaning embodied’.¹ In this collection, then, taste becomes complex, nuanced and redolent with possibility. While David Sutton’s contribution, for example, argues against pitting ‘higher’ senses against ‘lower’ and instead for ‘synesthesia’ as ‘the way that different senses elaborate on each other’ (312), at the same time Sutton underlines the particular significance of taste and smell ... ‘for encoding the random, yet no less powerful, memories of contexts past than, say, vision or words’. (315)

Wanting to re-visit, then, some of the meanings of an everyday moment of *laksa* dreaming, I return to trawl *The Taste Culture Reader*. The task at first seems daunting. The selection of writing represents a wide range of disciplines

and genres—medicine, psychology, gastronomy, oenology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, cultural geography, cultural studies, history, literary studies, biography; the extracts map locations as diverse as cheese shops in the Netherlands (Watson), a Carib-Northumbria restaurant on the moors of Northumberland (James), cemeteries in rural Mexico during *Días de los Muertos* [Days of the Dead] (Carmichael and Sayer) and impoverished farms in a high valley of the Ecuadorian Andes (Weismantel); the collection moves back in time (see Schivelbusch on the spice trade, for example), in memory (there is a rich collection of writing here), and forward to ‘postmodern’ concerns in relation to ‘artificial’ tastes and smells (Classen, Howes and Synnott), ‘authentic’, ‘simulated’ and ‘hybrid’ foods (James, Haden, Heldke) and the nostalgic tastes of nation and their re-invention through performance (Goldstein). It includes a formidable collection of established writers in the field, from those gastronomic and philosophical ‘gods’—Brillat-Savarin, Hume, Kant and, of course, Proust—to familiar ‘names’ in the present, such as Goody, Mintz, Mennell, Gabaccia and Visser. The collection also casts its political/theoretical net widely. Korsmeyer’s introductory comments stake a claim on relations of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, though of these, class—a dominant thread in discussions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cuisine and Bourdieu’s account of the ‘luxury/necessity’ distinction—has a more explicit presence within the book’s conceptual frameworks. In contrast, other dimensions of difference tend to be more subtly embedded in the details of case

studies. (Curiously, at least in the book's introduction, we find 'sexuality' elided into 'sexual behaviour' and, even then, this is rapidly relegated to a back seat, as a subset of gender relations.) (49)

The range and scope of this collection tempts a reviewer to adopt the language of excess, drawing on taste's own stockpile of sensuous imagery. I'll return to this. I also worry that over-consumption from this 'cornucopia of historical, cross-cultural and theoretical views' (cover blurb) will result in indigestion. Is this a collection too diffuse with too many competing 'tastes' to constitute a satisfying read? To be fair, this is a problem endemic to the genre. The challenge for anthologies and edited collections is to achieve a sense of wholeness—a 'collection'—however disparate their elements might seem. The organisation of this volume, with its thematic sections (for example, 'Body and Soul' [taste and religion], 'Eloquent Flavors' [specific tastes—salt, sugar, spices]) and notes summarising each section, certainly implies specific territories to be covered and logical routes through these. On the other hand, it is not simply a case of writing a 'collection' into being but also a question of readers' appetites and consumption practices. Here I'm suggesting that just as one might doggedly follow the set menu for this feast, there are other ways to eat at the table. My preference here is for a *degustation*—a range of small dishes chosen for their individual 'tastes', yet ordered with an eye to complementary flavours.

On this occasion, the selection of these 'tastes' (which would differ, perhaps, on a second reading, or for customers in search of

a different meal entirely) is guided by approaches in cultural studies concerned with everyday rituals and practices—with ways to think about these—and with the possibilities of ethnography—its moments and artefacts. Drawing on de Certeau's 'clever tricks' and Ben Highmore's 'figuring the everyday' as familiar-yet-strange, I search *The Taste Culture Reader* for traces of the curious, the quirky, even the disruptive.² Like my taste of *laksa* on the tongue, these are often mundane instances of cultural life and interaction with an unexpected twist. Viewed differently, they intrude on the analytic taken-for-granted, sometimes in quite powerful ways. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes' 'Thick Sauce: Remarks on the Social Relations of the Songhay' from *The Taste Culture Reader* provides an exemplar here. At the heart of Stoller and Olkes' narrative (and less usual in this volume of, mostly, delicious tastes) is a 'repulsive' taste—a sauce that is 'a sociocultural equivalent of vomit'—served to Stoller and Olkes during a period of fieldwork with the Songhay of Niger. (141) While this narrative might be dismissed simply as a traveller's tale of bad cooking or an ethnographer's account of the unavoidable discomforts of fieldwork, these writers draw from it dense layers of meaning: the cook's life story and her relationship to her extended family; the ethnographers' disruptive presence; the culinary hierarchies observed in relation to ingredients and flavours; the deliberate transgressions of these by the cook; the family's shame; the sauce's contradictory power to code yet re-encode meanings of belonging.

As Stoller and Olkes unravel the complexities of their analysis, a reader is delighted

not only by its fine textures (sauces that are 'carriers of gustatory messages that can contradict as well as reinforce verbal messages'), its ironic touches ('Stoller didn't lose weight during his visits') and its surprise ending ('now you are part of the family'), but also by the writing's own sensory qualities (the repetitive rhythms of 'a thin sauce for a thick social occasion'). (133–41) Methodologically speaking, the authors show their hands (and noses, mouths, ears and eyes) quite explicitly:

If, as anthropologists, we are content simply to observe or to 'read' social life, our descriptions will only taste of the paper on which they are written. If on the contrary, we try to evoke a full range of sensory experience, our descriptions will be full of taste, texture, and scent. (134)

Writing like this becomes almost edible—deceptively simple in its narrative event yet profoundly satisfying in its production and analytic potential. Beguiled by it, I am less anxious about using the seeming intangible 'taste of memory' to explore the curious, yet very 'real', flavours of homesickness or to reflect on the border politics of taste—cultural withholdings, exchanges, 'borrowings'.³ At the same time, in response to those concerns about outbreaks of 'foodie' hyperbole, I find writing as a form of sense-embedded practice (or in Stoller's words elsewhere, as 'sensuous scholarship') legitimated in this collection.⁴

After tastes of the Songhay sauces, one could turn to other 'dishes', other artefacts. There are many to tempt, but space is limited here.

Regretfully leaving aside, for example, David Sutton's intriguing 'The prickly pear today, it was honey' (313) drawn from his fieldwork on the Greek island of Kalymnos or Lisa Heldke's meditation on her own first contact with of 'galangal' or 'Thai ginger', I want to focus briefly on Nadia Seremetakis' contribution. The extract included here ('The Breast of Aphrodite') was published more than ten years ago, but in its re-reading (I promise), loses nothing of its poignancy or poetics. 'I grew up with the peach', she begins. 'It was well rounded and smooth like a small clay vase, fitting perfectly into your palm. Its interior was firm yet moist, offering a soft resistance to the teeth.' (297) From this point onwards, the peach's tastes, textures, scents and even shape (it is indeed a variety known as 'the breast of Aphrodite') pervade the analysis. The memory of no-longer-available peach is not simply an engaging fragment of biography framing the arguments to follow; instead, the peach continues, throughout the chapter, as a phenomenological space in which public culture is understood and played out. In a similar fashion to Bachelard's 'house' as the cradle of memory and belonging,⁵ Seremetakis' peach takes on a life of its own, and yet not—the artefact bears within it layered commensal meanings (shared substance and material reciprocities) and histories. ... The object invested with sensory memory speaks'. (303) Once again, there is much for cultural analysts to learn here about ways particular objects/tastes/events 'speak' of collective remembering and forgetting, yearning and imagining. And, again, for the craft of writing, there is much to learn about this 'speaking'.

Some final tid-bits for chilli eaters: a cookbook writer and a psychologist observe food preparation in a Mexican village. Their account of this, originally published in the early 1980s, is included in *The Taste Culture Reader's* first section, 'Physiology and Circumstance' that focuses on 'the physical determinants of sensation'. (3) However, Elizabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin's 'Culinary Themes and Variations' is hardly a 'straight' (scientific) documentation of the role of flavours in 'marking' a cuisine. The chapter begins with a sound ritually reverberating throughout the village—the grinding of chilli peppers. It ends with the potentially useful argument for understanding 'hybrid' foods and cultures of exchange: complex flavours, such as those resulting from the variety of chilli peppers and cooking methods used in Mexican dishes, not only affirm belonging through their familiarity but also provide a bridge to 'new' dishes with different ingredients. Meanwhile, Donna Gabaccia, developing an example of food creolisation in colonial America, excavates tastes of 'peppers and peanuts' in the diets of European-descended plantation owners in the Southeast (North and South Carolina, Georgia) and mentions a persistent historical 'blind spot' in observers' records: most of these families' cooks were African women. Gabaccia concludes:

'Food was not so much a common ground on which people declared themselves alike; rather it provided a visceral record of a shared history of meeting and interaction across social and cultural boundaries.' (84–5)

Elsewhere in the book from which this chapter originates, Gabaccia is optimistic that eating foods from different cultures ('multi-ethnic eating'), however problematic, provides a starting point, at least, for intercultural understanding.⁶ Allison James in her chapter, 'Identity and the Global Stew' is less so. Concerned that growing preoccupations with 'style' in English food encourages consumer raids on global markets and 'ethnic' communities in a cavalier mix-and-match fashion (beware the Chinese pizza or 'dumbed down' Indian dish, depleted of quantities of chilli and ghee), James warns against 'a careless cosmopolitanism, invoked through ignorance or choice'. (383)

These arguments of food tastes as the meeting ground of cultures (or as sites for invasion and plunder) continue in other chapters. They represent significant issues for practitioners of cultural studies, particularly in the face of current debates on globalisation, cosmopolitanism, border protection and 'new ethnicities'. Meanwhile, returning to those taste memories of coconut milk, chilli, galangal and lemongrass, we find that Classen, Howes and Synnott's chapter ('Artificial Flavours') allows an even more worrying scenario than 'inauthentic' Chinese pizza, vegetable tikka baguette in all its dazzling taste hybridities, or even re-located *laksa*: this is a future in which culinary imperialism is the theft of the materiality of food itself, and only its simulated smells linger, floating free of their referents. As an alternative to this dystopia, however, these writers express faith in the 'elusive' powers of smell and our cultural attachments to the 'organic' and its imaginaries (341) (analytic support, perhaps, for seizing the

day—the tastes and smells of those everyday, embodied moments).

Admittedly, my selection of chapters from *The Taste Culture Reader* has been an idiosyncratic one—a search for the tastiest morsels to satisfy the cravings of my own intellectual interests. Nevertheless, for the broader project of cultural studies, the collection has much to offer. Crucially, it reminds us of the significance of food in cultural life and, drawing on the book's subtitle, the significance of the *experience* of food and drink in everyday life. Taste in this volume refuses the ground of pure aesthetics. Accordingly, the book illustrates the potential of ethnography and other research practices to track such experience (however mundane, strange) and to engage with it creatively on behalf of pressing cultural/political questions. Finally, the leitmotif of 'taste' allows spaces for 'writing' the senses. In these spaces, such senses as taste and smell are not only the focus of analysis but also presences embedded in the research and writing process. Although ethnography, everyday life and the senses do not describe the entire field of cultural studies, in this collection they offer a trail of rich pickings—reflections on how we eat and drink together, how we remember, and how we imagine we might live.

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1. Ann Game, *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991, p. 177.
 2. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. xix; Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 16.
 3. The 'taste of memory' is 'borrowed' from the title of Marion Halligan's book of biographical essays, Marion Halligan, *The Taste of Memory*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2004.
 4. Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia, 1997.
 5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas, Beacon, Boston, 1969, p. 7.
 6. Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1998, p. 231.