TASTE! EXPERIMENTS FOR THE SENSES

Participatory exhibition from 30 September to 18 October 2020 at Museum für Naturkunde (Museum of Natural History) Berlin
Participatory exhibition from 30 September to 18 October 2020 in the Experimental Field for Participation and Open Science at Museum für Naturkunde (Museum of Natural History), Berlin.

TASTE! EXPERIMENTS FOR THE SENSES

Taste! – What is this exhibition about?

Experiment 1: What is going through your mind?

Experiment 2: Who are you?

Experiment 3: What do you want, and what do you know?

Experiment 4: What are you expecting?

Experiment 5: What can you hear?

Experiment 6: How will you arrange your dish?

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We thank all co-researchers involved in the TU Berlin project “Schmeck!” ("Taste!")

The exhibition is part of the citizen science project “Schmeck! Practices and aesthetics of eating in the governance of a sustainable transformation of food systems” directed by Jan-Peter Voß and Nina Langen.
Exhibition participants explore how different elements influence their experiences of tasting in a series of six experiments. They make choices along the way and pick up various ingredients, exercises, pieces of information and utensils. In the final phase, they combine all the variations they have already selected and investigated to compose a new tasting situation. In the process, they discover how taste can change and how it can be actively shaped.

THE “TASTE!” EXPERIMENTS

The tasting experiments are geared to investigating the sensory experience of tasting. What influences our perceptions of taste? How can we taste differently by making changes to the situations we eat in? We often eat pre-prepared meals, and when we cook ourselves, we tend to concentrate on the ingredients and how we want to combine them. But there is more to tasting than that: our sensory experience as we eat depends on the interplay of many different elements.

In reality, tasting always takes place in specific situations. Food does not always taste the same — what we taste is affected by our physical state and our mood, our thoughts and expectations, and our perceptions of our surroundings. It also depends on what we know about the food, what meaning it has for us, and what memories it evokes. The way we eat matters, too: we can nibble hesitantly at food or devour it greedily. We can eat with chopsticks or with our fingers. We can change the sequence and the shape of food and we can eat outside in the cold or inside on soft sofas.

The exhibition presents a tasting situation that has been broken down into individual elements. It provides opportunities to discover how tasting changes when a selection of the elements making up a tasting situation are
varied. As participants move through a series of experiments, they assemble a tasting situation of their own and discover just how complex tasting is. This helps us understand why tasting situations cannot be easily reproduced — why, for example, the wine we taste on holiday or the French fries from the outdoor swimming pool do not taste the same when we are back at home looking at our screens. The experiments reveal how sensitive and fragile our sense of taste is. But this very experience also helps us to recognize that a few small experiments can significantly alter our experience of tasting — and that our sense of taste is fundamentally open to being shaped. This opens up entirely new opportunities for both tasting and cooking; instead of designing and discovering dishes, we can design and discover tasting situations.

FURTHER EXERCISES

1. Try to think of some special tasting situations (like tomato juice on a plane, a kebab after a night out, or oysters and champagne at a reception) and work out how various components interact in particular ways in those situations.

2. Think about a film scene that shows a person eating and try to understand the different elements flowing into their overall tasting experience.

FURTHER READING


In this phase, participants choose and sample two foods and make a note of the associations triggered. The foods have been prepared and processed in a specific way that makes them difficult to identify. This enables participants to concentrate on their immediate sensory experience and describe the thoughts, memories, or emotions that arise. The idea is to evoke taste memories that are sparked directly by the smell and taste of the ingredients and not by what foods look like or are called.

**TASTE AND MEMORY**

What influence do memories and associations have on what we taste? We often compare what we are tasting with what we have already tasted at some previous point in time — and this inevitably brings up memories of our experiences and emotions in that earlier situation. Whether we like or dislike foods and whether we regard any particular dish as inedible or appetizing depends on our previous taste experiences and how we remember them. Memories of the situations, places and people encountered in the past matter as well as memories of, say, smells or noises perceived during eating. We cannot taste anything neutrally and independently of our memories and what they bring to specific tasting situations. The significance of our memories shows that tasting is a whole-body experience and that it begins before any food passes our lips. We can taste something as soon as we see it. Even imagining that we are eating it can be enough. We perceive remembered taste not only in our mouths and noses, but also in our throats and stomachs — for example when we remember tasting something that made us feel comforted or unwell.

**FURTHER EXERCISES**

1. For a week, write down what memories come to mind when you eat a very unusual — or familiar — food or dish.
2. Try to find a scene in a text or a film that shows a person eating a specific food or dish and remembering and describing what it brings to mind — smells, noises, situations, places or other people.

**FURTHER READING**

In this phase, participants sample a new food as if they were creatures with completely different bodies. As we cannot actually switch bodies, participants can only imagine they have a different body and approach and eat the food accordingly. This changes the way they eat, and the experiment has been designed to explore how this affects taste.

TASTE AND THE BODY

When we eat, we incorporate elements from the world around us into our bodies. We can do this in a huge range of ways. We can nibble at food hesitantly, feeling our way carefully as we go, or eat curiously, eagerly investigating the food with our lips and tongues. We can take vigorous bites from food or wolf it down greedily. Our bodies can connect with food and relate to it in very different ways. We can use a range of styles to approach food, make contact with it, move it around our mouths, grind it into small pieces, and swallow it. Every variation creates a new opportunity for our senses to perceive the food differently. Tasting is not something passive which simply happens to us when we encounter a food — it is something we do, a practice we engage in actively as we approach food with our bodies and with our internalized mental images of who or what we are and what we want from the food. This experiment focuses on approaching food as an entirely different kind of creature. But we can also change how we use our bodies to eat without engaging in such imaginative play, for example by eating while walking or lying down, with only one hand, or without using our back teeth.

FURTHER EXERCISES

1. Try to imagine that you are a baby or very old and eat accordingly.
2. Try eating a given food in different physical positions.

FURTHER READING

In this phase, participants choose between several different logics that can be applied to food: 1. Eating is political, 2. Eating is pleasure, 3. Eating is health. The information they are given with the food offered matches their chosen logic. The question here is how taste changes when food is approached with different logics and information corresponding to these logics is seen as relevant and absorbed.

TASTE AND KNOWLEDGE

Food and tasting can become charged with meaning in vastly different ways. We can see food from particular angles or in particular framings that may vary with the situations we find ourselves in. We can take an interest in specific aspects of eating and focus on different points as important. The information we are receptive to and see as relevant changes with our logic. We can evaluate one and the same food in quite different ways depending on the logic we adopt — and this also influences how the food tastes.

Specific frames and pieces of information are often part and parcel of the environments we eat in, be it because of family or cultural traditions, our circle of friends, or the occasion of a meal. In the public sphere, multiple frameworks struggle to gain the upper hand and compete to provide us with information. Various experts and advertising pros advocate vociferously for their own logics. This experiment focuses on how our perception of taste changes when we follow a particular logic and absorb information that reflects this specific perspective.

FURTHER EXERCISES

1. Try deciding once a day to adopt one of the three suggested logics when you eat. Note down what you know about the food that is relevant for this logic, what you taste, and how you feel as you eat. Then do some research to see what information you find when you focus on one of the other logics. Try the food again with your new knowledge.

2. Find more possible logics and try out the same exercise using different logics. For example: “Food is fuel for the body”, “Food is ecology”, “Food has its price”, “Food costs time”, “Food is art”.

FURTHER READING


In this phase, participants experiment with different expectations relating to the potential consequences of eating. “What will happen if I eat this or that food?” Participants taste two unknown ingredients with two sets of contrasting expectations. First they taste a food as if it were tasty, but very unhealthy, and then they sample a food which is first associated with social rejection and then with social acceptance. Sampling the same unknown food with different expectations can lead to surprising discoveries on how our expectations influence our perception of taste.

**TASTE AND EXPECTATIONS**

We never eat without forming expectations beforehand as to what we are going to eat. In addition to general interpretative frameworks and logics, we also have some highly specific expectations as to what effects we can expect when we eat something. How will this influence my health? How will other people judge me for eating this? Eating can have no effects until we actually eat. But we pre-judge the consequences of eating certain foods beforehand, and our prejudices and preconceptions guide our approach to food and may prompt us to hesitate or to tuck in with relish. Our sensory experience of taste can vary depending on our expectations as to how particular foods will affect our bodies or social status. The influence of expectations on taste is especially strong in routine eating situations. By offering unknown foods and consciously playing with expectations here, what we are trying to achieve is to shift existing pre-judgements and disrupt the habitual tasting that results from them.

**FURTHER EXERCISES**

1. Try to abandon your prejudices momentarily when you approach a food you have firm preconceptions about and to adopt a different, contrasting expectation. Then sample the food to see how this changes how it tastes to you.

2. Seek out situations you have not yet formed any expectations of. Eat something you are unfamiliar with. Or try eating something in a particular social context without knowing beforehand how it is typically perceived in that context.

**FURTHER READING**


In this phase, participants try out a food against changing sound or music backdrops (the sounds of the city or the sea, or heavy metal or classical music). The idea is to test how the taste of one and the same food changes as the sounds heard change.

TASTE AND ATMOSPHERE

In Western culture, a model of the five senses prevails that isolates individual sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, mouth and hands). This model neglects the many components of perception that influence each other and contribute to an overall impression that is essentially synaesthetic. Taste is always influenced by what we perceive with all our senses. Just like our memories, our bodies, and our logics and expectations, the atmosphere is part and parcel of every eating and tasting situation. Eating situations always arise in specific locations with specific background conditions. Smells, noises, the proximity of other people, architecture, landscapes and ambient conditions such as the temperature, the light or the wind can all influence eating situations and taste. This explains why creating just the right ambiance is increasingly such a central concern of restaurant designers and food marketing strategists. For this experiment, we have selected some sound recordings as one element of the atmosphere we eat in that can readily be varied. How do sounds in a given rhythm and at a given volume influence our perception of taste? Do some sounds contribute to more positive tasting experiences than others?

FURTHER EXERCISES

1. At home, choose a recording of music or sounds to listen to as you eat — something that you would normally not listen to while eating. Then make a note of your tasting experience as you eat your meal.

2. When you are eating outside the home, try to notice what you can hear. How does it affect your tasting experience? Note down what you discover here as well.

FURTHER READING


The final phase in our series of tasting experiments brings together elements gathered and investigated separately in the previous phases: ingredients, tasting notes on associations and memories, and choices (on physical positions, logics, expectations, and sounds). Participants pick a base to arrange their ingredients on and decide whether to eat with or without utensils. The final dish is given a title and photographed. At this point, participants still have one final decision to make: do they want to eat alone or in company? Every participant thus experiences their very own tasting situation at the end of the exhibition, one composed from the elements they have previously explored.

TASTE AND (RE-)COMPOSITION

Exploring the complexity of tasting is one of the fundamental ideas underlying the exhibition. Disassembling the tasting situation into individual elements enables experimental play with these elements. We have selected elements that are not central to our everyday cooking and eating. This creates opportunities for participants to discover and experience how taste changes when individual elements are varied — and how taste can be actively shaped.

In the initial stage of this final phase, some new elements are added: participants choose a base to eat from (a plate or a leaf) and decide whether to eat with their hands or use cutlery. From that point onwards, a transition is made from disassembling the tasting situation into reassembling its diverse elements. What results from combining elements in a certain way? The arrangement of the ingredients on the selected base is one aspect of this — and one that comes relatively close to our everyday cooking — but the preceding experiments have also heightened participants’ awareness of other elements we are less accustomed to considering as we eat: memories, logics, expectations, physical sensations, a sound backdrop, and the utensils used to arrange and consume the final self-composed dish. Inventing a title for this overall composition invites participants to find a word or phrase that can describe the specific combination of disparate elements chosen as a meaningful whole.

The final tasting experiment involves eating this self-composed dish in a self-composed eating situation — and experiencing the tasting effect that results from the interplay of precisely this combination of elements.

During this phase, participants can also vary an exceptionally significant element of taste that was not tested up to this point — by eating alone or in company. This gives participants the chance to explore how interacting with others influences their tasting experience.

EXPERIMENT 6
HOW WILL YOU ARRANGE YOUR DISH?

The final phase in our series of tasting experiments brings together elements gathered and investigated separately in the previous phases: ingredients, tasting notes on associations and memories, and choices (on physical positions, logics, expectations, and sounds). Participants pick a base to arrange their ingredients on and decide whether to eat with or without utensils. The final dish is given a title and photographed. At this point, participants still have one final decision to make: do they want to eat alone or in company? Every participant thus experiences their very own tasting situation at the end of the exhibition, one composed from the elements they have previously explored.
FURTHER EXERCISES

1. To examine the significance of social aspects for our tasting experience, try out the following exercises..
   - Eat and taste food alone, just for yourself.
   - When you are eating outside the home, you can investigate whether your tasting experience changes when passers-by can watch you as you eat.
   - Eat together with another person and observe yourselves as you eat.
   - Eat together with another person and have a conversation with them about your subjective experiences as you eat. Try to find words or gestures to describe it.
   - Eat a dish with another person and agree on a rating of the dish on a scale from 1–10 with them. Start by defining the criteria for this scale collaboratively.

2. To investigate the significance of various situational contexts, try out the following exercises.
   - Think of some further tasting experiments with additional elements of taste that were not taken up in the exhibition.
   - Cook interpretatively and create a tasting situation based on a topic or concept.