A Time and a Place for a Peach
Taste Trends in Contemporary Cooking

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ABSTRACT  Taste as a sense and as an aesthetic judgment has always been integral to the restaurant dining experience, an experience that is itself a locus of material culture rich in sociocultural symbolism. Chefs around the world are beginning to play with taste by not only manipulating the sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami tastes perceived by the papillae on the tongue, but also by manipulating the taste>memory>emotion reaction invoked by all sensory perception. Two favorite new ingredients are time (which often takes the form of history, or fermentation) and place (which often takes the form of geography, or culture). From Grant Achatz at Next in Chicago to René Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen to Ferran Adrià at El Bulli in Catalunya, the world’s greatest chefs are serving up a new form of multisensory satiety and satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: taste, memory, nostalgia, restaurants, food in culture
Since Aristotle, the sense of taste has ranked second class. Proximal, primal, undeveloped, contra-contemplative, and spiritually insignificant are a few of the ways taste has been dismissed philosophically through the ages (see Korsmeyer 1999). And yet the sense of taste, not to mention the concept of taste that derives from it, persists as a defining characteristic of culture.

Whether one subscribes to the class-based social prescriptions of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) or the reflexive pragmatics of Antoine Hennion (2004), taste is personal, communal, and complex. Despite its relatively limited physiological articulation in the body, taste is compelling as a sense in and of itself – to taste something is to know it in a unique and personal way. But taste is even more interesting as a concept, as a metaphor, as an allusion to a hierarchy of aesthetic judgment that distinguishes the taster from the tasted, one taster from another. When trying to understand material culture, the word taste, a metonym for the sense and the sensibility of discernment, is both useful and confounding. Cultural critic Allen Weiss illustrates the complexity of taste, both the sense and the word, succinctly:

According to context, taste means: the sense by which we distinguish flavors; the flavors themselves; an appetite for such preferred flavors; the discriminative activity according to which an individual likes or dislikes certain sensations; the sublimation of such value judgments as they pertain to art, and ultimately to all experience; and by extension and ellipsis, taste implies good taste and style, established by means of an intuitive faculty of judgment. (1997: 7)

Unpacking taste into its discrete scientific, cultural, and philosophical components is one approach to understanding the processes by which taste works, its cultural value. Though intriguing from a biological standpoint, reducing the sense of taste to the positive ions or proteinaceous receptors that trigger neurotransmitters is not very helpful in understanding the cultural complexities of eating. Adding olfaction helps flesh out flavor, but even taken together, taste and smell fall short of explaining the sum total of sensations that lead to the enjoyment and appreciation of a meal (Duffy and Bartoshuk 1996; Shepherd 2012). Inserting memory into the equation brings one closer to an understanding that is useful, though one that is still not easy to apply. Rather than dissecting taste into its constituent components to make it practical, both as a tool for analysis and as a technique in the kitchen, there may be some benefit to keeping it messy, amorphous, and whole.

In her essay about the loss of the traditional Greek rodhákino peach, known colloquially as “the breast of Aphrodite,” C. Nadia Seremetakis provides a framework for understanding the cloudy nature and historicity of taste and the other senses.
We find no clear-cut boundaries between the senses and emotions, the mind and body, pleasure and pain, the voluntary and involuntary, and affective and aesthetic experience. Such culturally specific perspectives on sensory experience are not sheer comparative curiosities. They are crucial for opening up a self-reflexive, culturally and historically informed consideration of the senses. (1994: 5)

From Seremetakis’s perspective, senses cannot be separated from emotions or memories, or any other embodied experiences, for that matter. The senses can barely be separated from each other due to their complex interiority. These days, one of the characteristics that distinguish the world’s great chefs is their desire (and ability) to manipulate complex sensory relationships, to play with cultural connections to food, to wrangle emotions, and mess with memories all during the course of a restaurant meal. Whether by using advanced technologies or foraging for forgotten ingredients, chefs are tinkering with the presumed natural order of the sense>memory>emotion chain reaction that has traditionally led to satiety and satisfaction. They are inverting the physical forms of food, evoking nostalgia through flavor, reflecting geography through presentation, and otherwise requiring diners to engage in an interactive and emotional way to whatever is being served. Back in the 1950s, it was the great American restaurateur Joe Baum who lived, worked, and succeeded by the maxim that all restaurants are theater, that service is a performance, and that hospitality is entertainment (Mariani 1991: 189–90). Today, with chefs in the role of director, food is performative, too.

Two seasonings employed in this new way of cooking, this new way of thinking food (apologies, Levi-Strauss), stand out as particularly significant given today’s fast-paced, forward moving, increasingly virtual, global society. With ever more proficiency, chefs are adding time (i.e., history) and place (i.e., geography) to their food, as if to ground it in a moment, any moment, and a location, any location. More Seremetakis than Alice Waters, these time-place creations are not simply nods to traditional methods and/or local producers. Rather, they reflect a concerted effort to find a historical resonance, to toy with memories, to invert cultural culinary norms, and to evoke physical landscapes, all through the gateway of the tongue.

What Is the Taste of History? The Flavor of Time?

As if to underscore the vulnerability of the sense of taste to manipulation by cultural factors, its very muddled messiness, in the past decade a new taste has been welcomed into the traditional quartet. Alongside sweet, sour, salty and bitter, a fifth taste has been generally accepted – umami, a Japanese word that is difficult to translate into English, and is often simply referred to as “tastiness” or “deliciousness.” More easily translated into biochemistry, umami
is the perception of glutamate, the salt form of glutamic acid, one of ten nonessential amino acids.

Glutamic acid breaks down into its salt form during processes that transpire over time: fermentation, drying, aging of various sorts – in soy products, such as miso, in desiccated products, such as sun-dried tomatoes, and in aged products, such as Parmesan cheese and prime beef. Given the duration required to produce these transformations, umami could be considered the flavor of time, or rather, the flavor of the passing of time. Before the concept umami made its way West, Serematakis asked, “What is fermentation if not history? If not a maturation that occurs through the articulation of time and substance?” (1994: 3). Time ripens; time concentrates; time decays. Time is money. It is not a coincidence that most items rich in natural umami – as opposed to manufactured umami, which is added speedily in the form of monosodium glutamate (MSG) – are generally high-priced.

Yet, despite the appeal of umami and the characteristic yumminess it represents, the taste of time, like other tastes, cannot be reduced to the perceptions of the papillae on the tongue. The taste of time, tastes in time, are part of the complex and emotional process of memory and forgetting. Again, Seremetakis illustrates the socio-historical-cultural relationship between memory and the senses:

The disappearance of Aphrodite’s peach is a double absence; it reveals the extent to which the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence. That first peach of my childhood carried with it allusions to distant epochs where the relationship between food and the erotic was perhaps more explicit, named, and sacrilized; a relation that although fragmented and gone underground, was carried over through the centuries by the rodhákino, a fruit bearing myth in its form. (1994: 2)

It stands to reason that if the sense>memory>emotion chain is possible, then so, too, might the inverse chain be: emotion>memory>sense. And why not memory>emotion>sense? Or something entirely new? One imaginable result of playing around with the senses, of manipulating the objects sensed and the reactions they trigger, is quite possibly the production of new sensations, that is, new tastes. New tastes produce new memories and new emotions that lay on top of old tastes, old memories, and old emotions. It is this multidimensional and resonant aspect of sensory information that adds a mythic quality to flavor, that gives flavor to myth.

In fact, a lifetime of research on flavor by neurobiologist Gordon Shepherd (2012) suggests that as far as taste and smell are concerned, such manipulation is not only possible, but it is built into the human sensory system. Shepherd asserts the primary role the brain
plays in the perception of flavor, which he defines precisely as the combination of sensations produced by smell, specifically retronasal olfaction, and taste, whose role is less important. Shepherd submits, “It is important to realize that flavor does not reside in a flavorful food any more than color resides in [a] colorful object” (2012: 5). The location of flavor in the brain is what makes it such an effective tool for triggering and mingling memories and emotions (2012: 165–183). (Shepherd notes that smell is the primary sensory catalyst here, though some links of taste and emotion are believed to be hard-wired.) The brain’s complexity and plasticity not only make sensory manipulation possible, they make it fun and delicious, too, as chefs around the world have learned.

**What Is the Taste of Geography? The Flavor of Place?**

Just as **umami** may be considered a synecdoche for the taste of time, **terroir** may be considered a synecdoche for the taste of place. A highly articulated concept in French gastronomy, **goût de terroir** originated as a descriptor of French wines that were resonant with a particular flavor resulting from what is believed (in France) to be an age-old symbiosis of grape variety, soil composition, and wine-making artisanship. Anthropologist Amy Trubek explains the unique cultural import of **terroir** in France:

> When the French take a bite of cheese or sip of wine, they taste the earth: rock, grass, hillside, valley, plateau. They ingest nature, and this taste signifies pleasure, a desirable good. Gustatory pleasure and the evocative possibilities of taste are intertwined in the French fidelity to the taste of place. (2008: 17)

In her book on the subject of the taste of place, Trubek illustrates how **terroir** has evolved from a culturally specific term used by the **vignerons** and artisanal food producers of France to a common trope of contemporary gastro-consumerism. In the process, she contends, terroir has become a “transnational mode of discernment … an intervention into the vast array of placeless and faceless foods and beverages now available to people everywhere” (2008: 102).

Trubek’s contemporary, cross-cultural **terroir** is not tied to geography, per se, though it resonates with a geographic past. Nor is it the simple sum of geography plus culture, whether of a place or, moreover, of a practice. **Terroir** has come to represent a particular perspective (she coins the term “foodview”) that informs a unique food knowledge that replaces any traditional, localized, agricultural understanding of where food comes from or how it is made – a byproduct of a global food system (2008: 217–19). The taste of **terroir** thus includes the flavor of a place, the (presumed) traditional way something is produced, the **localized** culture of the people who appreciate it, and nostalgia for an authentic past. It is very much like the taste of Seremetakis’s mythical peach.
Serving Up Time and Place

Priscilla Ferguson nicely juxtaposes time and place vis-à-vis food and restaurants to create a taxonomy of cuisine. She sets traditional cuisine – authentic, local, orally transmitted, born of scarcity, and rooted in geography – against modern cuisine – self-conscious, complex, creative, intellectual, sensual, born of abundance, and placeless (2004: 23–5). According to her taxonomy, the food served by Alice Waters at Chez Panisse, which celebrates local ingredients and simple, pan-Mediterranean preparations, sits comfortably on the side of traditional. The food served by Ferran Adrià at El Bulli in Roses, Spain, the product of never-before-conceived (let alone created) dishes crafted in a kitchen “laboratory” using all manner of technical wizardry and ingredients from around the world, lies far on the modern end of her spectrum. But where to situate the trend brewing among the great chefs and restaurants emerging today who concoct new combinations of time and place, mixing modernity with tradition, playing with our senses, creating mythic tastes, and cooking up contemporary myths?

Taste-Time Travel, Chicago-style

In Chicago, Grant Achatz, the world renowned chef of Alinea – a celebrated restaurant with a Michelin three-star rating that was ranked sixth in the world in the 2011 iteration of the World’s 50 Best Restaurants program – is overtly manipulating time and place at his newly opened Next, a highly styled, high-concept “theme” restaurant. The intention is that every three months the entire menu will change, not with the seasons, but with the whims of Achatz and his executive chef Dave Beran, who will frame their cooking in a different geographical location and historical period at the start of each twelve-week run.

When Next opened in early April 2011, the setting was Paris 1906. Achatz and his kitchen brigade crafted the menu from recipes in August Escoffier’s seminal Guide Culinaire (originally written in 1903), itself a codification and modernization of the traditional haute French cuisine that came before it. The design of the contemporary dining room relies on neutral colors and textures that are meant to serve as a timeless background, a canvas on which the different culinary themes will play out. In a video interview, Achatz (2011) referred to the dining room as “a point of embarkment or travel.” A long, bent, cast-iron girder runs the length of the ceiling, an allusion to structural elements you find in train stations and airports. The overall intent, as Achatz described, “is to make it appear that somehow this whole building got thrown into a time machine so it kind of twisted and morphed” (2011). In July 2011 Achatz transported the restaurant to Bangkok 2060. Future themes are anticipated to include Sicily 1947, Hong Kong 2036, and perhaps even Napa Valley, October 28, 1996, the date Achatz began working with his culinary mentor, Thomas Keller, at the famed French Laundry. (The exact dates, however,
change whenever Achatz mentions them.) In the Winter of 2011 the theme was “childhood.” The kitchen and the dining room at Next are designed to be as malleable as possible to accommodate the diverse needs of these different styles of cooking and dining. (One suspects Joe Baum, whose notion that all restaurants were theater, informed generations of American restaurateurs, would be envious of the audacity, ambition, and entertainment value of the whole idea (see Mariani 1991).)

Achatz’s original concept document summed up his immodest goal for the project: “Each season, Next will strive to be the best restaurant serving a world-cuisine in Chicago … the best French restaurant, then the best Italian, then the best Mexican” (Achatz and Kokonas 2011). It was during a conversation between Achatz and his incredulous but optimistic business partner, Nick Kokonas, that the era was added to the idea. That Achatz will pin each of the cuisines he will cook to a particular period has many practical benefits. For starters, it precludes comparing Achatz’s French restaurant, his Italian restaurant, or his Chinese restaurant with any other, whether in Chicago, Paris, Palermo, or Beijing. It also makes each restaurant a new restaurant, thereby generating a constant stream of interest from press and diners alike. But the dates do more than that. They change the taste expectation by implicating history into the sensory expectation.

As a point of fact, Next is not the first restaurant to write constant change into its business plan. Since it opened in Manhattan in 1959, The Four Seasons, which Joe Baum created with help from James Beard, has changed the menu, the color of the staff uniforms, the tablecloths, and the foliage every three months (Mariani 1994). More recently, Park Avenue Spring (which is followed in sequence by Park Avenue Summer, Autumn, and Winter) has been closing its doors, redecorating, and retooling its menu four times a year since June 2007. (The staff brag about having the transition time down to forty-eight hours.) But both of these restaurants maintain their identities and their clientele before and after the transition. Rather than attempts to capture another time and place entirely, these changes are intended to keep the restaurants, and especially their menus, fresh, fixed in the present rather than the past. The “new” restaurants that emerge reflect a moment that is now, a place that is here; they offer a taste of today.

In the hands of another team, one less accomplished and less esteemed than Achatz and Kokonas, the whole concept of Next would be hokey. (Perhaps the concept is still hokey, but the execution is not.) Despite the inherent contradiction in the American dining scene that prides itself on authenticity while celebrating all manner of transplanted French, Italian, and Japanese restaurants, theme restaurants are summarily derided. (What is New York’s Balthazar brasserie, a critical and consumer success, if not a French theme restaurant?) Presumably, the skill and attention to detail, especially
sensory details, such as taste and smell, not to mention the money, poured into Next takes the project out of the realm of crass commercialization that deflates the cultural capital of other theme restaurants. (The class of the presumed clientele plays a role here, too, separating it from Disneyland, which is also produced with skill, attention to detail, and plenty of money.) In fact, the sensory details are what legitimize the whole enterprise. The accuracy of his taste recreations is undisputed. Videos of exotic ingredients arriving at Next have gone viral on the Web (see http://tiny.cc/nextthai). Achatz admits he is obsessed with sourcing everything he needs to make the food exactly as it should be without compromise. More than Escoffier’s pressed duck or a delicious som tam, what Next serves is culinary myth.

In a world before the Internet, which serves Next as an essential resource for information, recipes, ingredients, kitchen equipment, and serving utensils, such a concept would be near impossible. It would also be unnecessary. As Trubek posits, one of the impetuses
behind the spread of the trope of terroir is a sense of placelessness that has intensified in our virtual, global world. Obviously, there is no context, barely even an antecedent, for anyone eating in Chicago in 2011 to understand the flavors, the eating experiences of Paris 1906. Unexpectedly, Achatz, who famously worked with architects to design new, modern devices on which to present his food to guests at Alinea, found one of the most difficult challenges to be plating food in the style of an earlier time. The food plated in a historically accurate manner just did not look very appetizing today.

Every meal is a sensory experience. Restaurants, by definition, afford contrived eating experiences (see Finkelstein 1989). But not every meal is the product of a conscious manipulation of senses, emotions, and memories. Seremetakis suggests the consumption of such sensory experiences might have a unique, totalizing impact:

Memory is the horizon of sensory experiences, storing and restoring the experience of each sensory dimension in another, as well as dispersing and finding sensory records outside the body in a surround of entangling objects and places … each episode of consumption is relatively absolute and quickly totalizing because it never lingers long enough in the senses as social memory to be stitched into a historical fabric with the others it has displaced. (1994: 9–10)

Locating each iteration of Next in a distant time and place fosters the production of culinary myth through the consumption of culinary memory. If every taste lost is actually the memory of a taste, as Seremetakis contends, then what is the value of lost tastes that are found? Or rather, what is the value of the pursuit of lost tastes that are never to be found? Ironically, one answer to this rhetorical question can be found online, where seats for dinners at Next (which in a unique reversal of the typical restaurant dining model must all be purchased in advance) are trading at upwards of US$3,000 apiece.

**Dinner in Denmark**

Halfway around the world, a different taste of time and place is being served up at Noma in Copenhagen. Ranked number one on the same international list that put Alinea in sixth place, chef René Redzepi has fused various culinary traditions, both real and imagined, from northern European countries into what he and his admirers call a new Nordic cuisine. The name of the restaurant is a contraction of the Danish words *nordisk* (“Nordic”) and *mad* (“food”). Unlike Achatz, whose project of culinary historiography is an attempt to capture the imagined sensory experience and flavors of something lost, using time and place to give taste to cultural myths, Redzepi’s project of inventing a new national cuisine that draws on the geography and the culinary traditions of existing cultures, is about using time and place to give myth to taste.
Dinner at Noma is exhilarating and delicious. A recent meal felt like a journey through the Danish countryside. During the more than five hours we sat in the restaurant, Redzepi and his team led us into a garden, through a meadow, into the forest, by the seashore, and then into the ocean itself. We dug into a flowerpot to harvest baby vegetables from rye-bread dirt. We ate jittery live shrimp off of ice and plucked oysters from a cauldron of ocean rocks and seaweed that smelled of the tide. We ate langoustine tails off warm basalt stone. Pine needles, moss, hay, and wood sorrel were among the foraged ingredients the kitchen staff used not only to evoke the taste of new Nordic cuisine but also to situate it in a “natural” environment, a gastronomic habitat.

Little about Noma is an accident, save, perhaps, for the meeting of Claus Meyer, a visionary entrepreneur, and Redzepi, a young, talented, and ambitious chef. At the time of their meeting in 2003, Meyer already had the unlikely idea of creating a restaurant to showcase the cuisine of the northern countries in a loft space that was part of an eighteenth-century warehouse known as the Nordatlantens Brygge (the North Atlantic Wharf). But first he needed to find a chef who would rise to the challenge of figuring out what such a cuisine might be, and also one who would not be easily dissuaded by the gastronomic backlash that this far-fetched concept would engender. Redzepi, who had worked with Ferran Adrià at El Bulli in Spain and with Thomas Keller at The French Laundry – in the same kitchens, coincidentally, where Achatz’s culinary perspective was also shaped – was up to the task, though in the introduction to his cookbook he admits that he really had no idea what Nordic cuisine might be, either (2010: 11).

During a gastronomic discovery tour through the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland, three months before the restaurant was set to open, this new cuisine began to take form. Redzepi recorded the journey in a diary that is published in his cookbook. In it you see him picking and choosing flavors, techniques, and even artifacts from the producers, culinary traditions, and cultures he encountered. He curated the sensory experience of these remote places through the lens of what might end up in some form on the tables of “the best restaurant in the world.” Here Redzepi describes an emotional eating experience in the Faroe Islands:

Kjartan introduces us to Gunnar “Marnie” Simonsen. Great personality, fisherman to the bone. We drive to his little fishing cave, around 15 kilometers out of Tórshavn. Here we eat live langoustines. The shell is shaved from the tail, while trying to avoid the furious and desperate claws snapping at us. A little salt on the tail and in they go! You can still feel the meat pulsating in the mouth. The juice from the meat gels instantly on the lips. Wild! The tears are flowing. (2010: 20)
There is an obvious connection between these live langoustines that brought Redzepi to tears and the live shrimp that terrified me and my dining companions nearly a decade later at Noma. The shrimp arrived at our table in a glass jar of ice. We were instructed to open the jar, grab them, dip them in a mayonnaise-based sauce, and swallow as they flitted. The experience gave new meaning to *amuse-bouche*. It also gave new meaning to the process by which chefs can manipulate their diners to produce new culinary myths.

The path from the ancient Nordic fishing village to the internationally renowned restaurant was not direct. Those shrimp, whose sweet, clean taste was only evident after the realization of what one had just done dissipated on the mind’s tongue, were transformed from objects of necessity and tradition into objects of legitimization and performance. We were scared by the shrimp, so when Redzepi approached the table, opened the jar, grabbed one, and ate it – just like that – we were amazed. He, arguably one of the world’s most sophisticated, intellectual chefs cooking in one of the most sophisticated cities, for an instant looked like a primitive animal eating a bug. What is more, we wanted to be like him, we longed to be able to do what he had just done. (I had to wait for the poor things to fade into a hypothermic, oxygen-deprived lethargy before I could bring myself to eat them.)
Transforming culinary traditions by inverting their context is only one way Redzepi has managed to create a new Nordic cuisine that in a span of less than ten years feels authentic and real. Despite a long European tradition of chefs cooking ingredients found in the wild, Redzepi has turned foraging into a worldwide craze. From the piles of press foraging has received, one imagines young men and women in chef jackets and check pants scouring the countryside everywhere for things to cook the way I recall seeing little, old Greek and Italian women in black house dresses picking dandelions and other “weeds” alongside the roads in Toronto when I was growing up. Wood sorrel, bull rushes, moss, pine needles, hay, and other found foliage find their way onto Redzepi’s plates, and now they can be found on menus in restaurants in New York City, Toronto, and Portland, Oregon, too. By using ingredients that convey both literally and figuratively the taste of a particular place, Redzepi’s cooking defies challenges to its authenticity. His presentations, which often recall the natural state in which the ingredients grow – milk skin formed with milk from pastured cows accented with grass, seafood served on seascapes of ice and frozen rocks, wild greens and “dirt” strewn on the plate as they might be found in nature – unusual and exciting on a restaurant table, reinforce that his creative, sophisticated, and thoroughly modern cooking derives from some natural past.

A comment made by Redzepi early in his diary shows the process of culinary myth making at work. Leif Sørensen, a chef colleague from a restaurant in Copenhagen, was part of a boat crew leading Redzepi’s group around the Faroese archipelago. Sørensen had prepared some local specialties for him to try, including air-cured mutton, cured lamb, dried fish, and salted and dried pilot whale. Too strong in flavor for most upscale restaurant diners to enjoy, perhaps, Redzepi nonetheless appreciated their authenticity and conceived of an alternate use to add value to his project:

Leif’s specialties were very interesting to foreigners. Very strong in flavor, salty, fermented, dried. I am not sure how the Danes will take to these flavors. One could possibly use them like spices. (Redzepi 2010: 22)

Both the understanding that the flavors he is looking for must play to a foreign audience, Danish or otherwise, and the notion that changing the category of an ingredient, from food to spice, will mitigate the intensity while still allowing the claim some sort of authentic tradition of his food, resonates with the processes of cultural transformation that Seremetakis, Trubek, and Ferguson describe. A taste, however exotic – of terroir, of the past, of a particular place – becomes an accent, a trigger for a memory that most people who experience it will not even ever have had. The story is built in, consumed. This is food as narrative, a key ingredient of myth.
Spanish Creativity, Japanese Identity

I stated earlier that Grant Achatz and his Next concept might not have been conceivable before the world became virtual, before social media replaced social interaction, and the Internet became an essential kitchen tool. I must admit now that neither Next nor Noma would likely have been noteworthy before El Bulli.

René Redzepi and Grant Achatz may be the most influential chefs of the moment, but Ferran Adrià is arguably the most influential chef of our time. At El Bulli, his small restaurant in a small town on the Costa Brava in Catalunya, some two and a half hours northeast of Barcelona, Adrià ignited a culinary revolution of global proportion serving things only he could imagine and only he (and a large team of unpaid interns or stagiaires from around the world) could expend the time and energy to figure out how to produce (see Abend 2011). For five years before Noma took the top spot on the World’s 50 Best list, that position was held by El Bulli. No one has been able to name Adrià’s style of cooking or his approach to food in a way that satisfies him. Neither “molecular gastronomy,” a phrase coined by the French chemist Hervé This, nor “modernist cuisine,” a phrase embraced by the obsessive American culinary encyclopedist Nathan Myhrvold, nor “techno-emotional cooking,” a phrase proposed by Catalan journalist Pau Arenós, do it justice, he believes, though the first is the one that sticks (see This 2005; Abend 2008; Myhrvold 2011).

Using an impressive array of laboratory-grade technology, much of it customized for his kitchen, Adrià turned liquids into solids, served frozen dishes hot and hot dishes frozen. He created emulsified foams out of everything and when he got tired of that he turned it all into flavorful beads of caviar through a process he called “spherification.” Adrià’s spherical olives – comprised of a thin olive-paste skin enrobing a liquid olive juice center immersed in olive oil to look like an ordinary olive but taste like so much more – are a sensation that chefs have copied the world over. Vacuums, hydrocolloids, immersion circulators, thermocouples, and pressure cookers were always at his fingertips. His intensity reflected less the work of a mad scientist and more the passion of a gifted craftsman. Moreover, Adrià mastered manipulation of the taste>memory>emotion chain. In a personal communication, Adam Sachs, a food and travel journalist who had just returned from a blow-out El Bulli dinner orchestrated for press before Adrià closed the restaurant for good in October 2011, was still in awe three weeks later as he described how intricately the tastes unfolded on his tongue, and how with each unfolding another emotion was triggered, another memory unlocked.

Pop-culture critic Fabio Parasecoli compared Adrià’s approach to food to Derrida’s approach to text, noting “the same provocative use of estrangement, intended to make the most familiar structures, classifications and conceptual systems totally unfamiliar; the same intense effort to subvert any absolute set of assumptions” (2001: 63). The goal for Adrià, as Parasecoli sees it, has been “to relentlessly fray...
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the signifying differences in the canonized and mythicized culinary discourse." But because this is, ultimately, food and not thought, and because there is nourishment, not to mention a financial transaction, to consider, Parasecoli notes that Adrià’s games, all chef games, must at some point end:

Adrià stops playing when he is forced to recognize that there are elements that cannot be categorized, which would lie outside any systematic and structural effort at knowledge … We can describe all the distinguishing gustatory traits we perceive when we eat a stalk of asparagus, yet there remains an ineffable quality that allows us to recognize it as asparagus … Our experience is connected to our past, to our prejudices, to the way we approach food, to our mental universe, to the way we order things within it … Culture, again, plays a paramount role, with its categories and preconceptions, making it clear that taste is far less natural than one might think. (2001: 71)

Neither Achatz nor Redzepi – nor even Adrià – are the first chefs to recognize and manipulate the complexities of taste. Dining has always been understood as a multi-sensory, sociocultural experience, an intimate interaction with and ingestion of the material world (see Finkelstein 1989; Spang 2000; Beriss and Sutton 2007). The restaurant provides a stage for the public performance of an intimate act, and performing it in such a place brings the sensory and emotional richness of human experience to the table.
But Seremetakis cautions about the performance of the senses. She notes that the senses provide an instantaneous, involuntary link between perception and memory. Their performance is not theatrical, but ontological. According to Seremetakis, senses complete the material world:

> [T]he surround of material culture is neither stable nor fixed, but inherently transitive, demanding connection and completion by the perceiver … Performance is a moment where the unconscious levels and accumulated layers of personal experience become conscious through material networks, independent of the performer … Here sensory memory as the mediation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation which brings the past into the present as a natal event. (1994: 7)

I would be remiss to conclude before noting that within the highly articulated food culture of Japan, these Western trends might seem trite. Many top chefs in the West, Adrià included, return to Japan for inspiration. Mastery, connoisseurship, classification, and creativity are hallmarks of Japanese food culture, each rooted in time and place, and experienced through the filter of nature, albeit nature manipulated by man. Japanese food is fundamental to Japanese culture and to Japanese identity in a way few other nationalities, certainly not the Danes and perhaps not even the French, can comprehend. Donald Richie, one of the most respected American commentators on Japanese culture, begins to explain the relationship of the Japanese to their cuisine:

> There exists a concern for the purity of the Japanese cuisine as it has evolved, and Japan remains one of the countries where food represents a lineage, going back into history. Where, indeed the cuisine is rightly viewed as one of the cultural adjuncts of the country itself. (1982: 12)

Even the games of Adrià’s meals, the transformations represented in the changes of physical state he induces, the interactivity and fun he values in the eating experience, have an antecedent in the aesthetics of Japanese food culture. Richie describes a similar aspect of the aesthetic system of Japanese food and the transgressions it affords:

> It is enough, in America and Europe, that a steak looks like a steak, a chicken like a chicken. In Japan, while fish should look like fish, the fish dish ought also to look like something more. It ought to reflect within its composition another concern, one the West considers aesthetic. The effect should be as pleasing to the eye as the taste is to the tongue. At the same time there is a canon of presentation, a system of culinary aesthetics to be satisfied. (1982: 9)
In this context, *because* of this context, taste means something different to Japanese, something beyond the glutamate-rich deliciousness of umami, for which the use of the Japanese word in other languages is not without import. History and culture inform the Japanese sense of taste to such a degree that they taste things others cannot. It is not uncommon as a Westerner to be searching for any evidence of flavor in a mouthful of food while the Japanese around you are in raptures of gustatory delight.

Which is not to say that these international trends in taste and cooking I have described have not made it to Japan as well. On a recent trip I ventured to the Michelin three-star restaurant Les Créations de Narisawa, number twelve on the World’s 50 Best list. While chestnut bread dough rose in glass beakers on the table before being baked in a primitive oven made from hot lava stones, chef Yoshihiro Narisawa served a salad meant to represent the forest floor, mushrooms, moss, dirt, and all. A friend and colleague of Redzepi’s and these other chefs, Narisawa’s manipulations of taste through time and place in the context of Japanese food culture sets him another bull-rush apart. The Japanese categorize Narisawa’s restaurant as “French” because of his training, the restaurant’s name, and the fact that Narisawa has received three Michelin stars. But really all they mean by calling it French is that what he is doing is not traditionally Japanese. It is not French, either. Instead, it is part of a global trend to use hyper-local ingredients, naturalistic presentations, and adopted culinary traditions to create a new concept of taste, one that situates the sensory experience in a particular time and place, both real and imagined, to alight emotions and trigger memories which thereby create culinary myths that move food from the realm of everyday into something more important and delectable.

**Time, Place, Taste, Memory, and Everything’s Peachy**

And what of Aphrodite’s peach? Was there ever a peach that tasted as good as the story of its loss? Today’s chefs have taken the manipulation of taste to new levels, changing not only the nature of dining, but also the nature (and culture) of food itself. Escoffier created Peach Melba to honor the most famous opera diva of his day. Alice Waters famously served a Frog Hollow Farms peach on a plate totally unadorned to make a point about the role of the chef vis-à-vis the role of the farmer in cooking. Ferran Adrià’s 2006 menu concluded with a peach presented in liquid form. All of these peaches contain elements of the flavor and culture of the lost Greek peach. They are all delicious.

**Notes**

1. For an overview of the physiology of taste, see Bartoshuk and Beauchamp (1994: 421–2).
2. In Greece, as in many countries around the world, global economic pressures over the last fifty years have diminished the number of
varieties of fruits and vegetables available in the marketplace. Seremetakis blames the European Economic Community, the precursor to the EU, for the loss of her beloved peach and the struggle to maintain Greek identity because after its formation, the production of peaches and other produce was purposefully standardized so that they could be commodified. In her opinion, countries negotiated international markets at the expense of local culture.

3. In the interest of full disclosure, I am one of twenty-seven regional Academy Chairs who oversee the voting panelists that generate the annual rankings of the World's 50 Best Restaurants, a program administered by the London-based Restaurant magazine. Chicago does not fall into my Eastern USA territory. Much of the experience and insight I have about the chefs and restaurants in this piece derive from my work on this project and at the James Beard Foundation, for which I regularly travel to different cities to explore restaurants and communicate frequently with chefs, journalists, and other food professionals about trends.

4. These trends are not limited to restaurants of international renown with prices to match. For several months in the spring of 2011, I could walk a few blocks from my apartment in the East Village neighborhood of New York City and have a relatively inexpensive prix-fixe dinner at What Happens When, a pop-up restaurant that changed its theme, menu, and decor every month until the state liquor authority shut it down for a license infringement. The pop-up’s website called the themes “movements.” I experienced Movement 3, the impressionist Paris of Renoir (menus were presented on painter’s palettes). Movement 4 was “Jazz.” In fact, the whole pop-up restaurant concept that is exciting chefs and diners in cities around the world could be seen as a manipulation of the temporality of taste, a form of distinction that among other effects serves to separate the taste memories of the people who actually ate there with the taste myths of the people who did not.

References


