Tasting in mundane practices: Ethnographic interventions in social science theory

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TASTING, AN OBJECT TO INVESTIGATE

This thesis offers an investigation into tasting, and in particular into moments in which something, as it is put in German, “tastes good”. It does so through an ethnographic exploration of sensual engagements with food and drink in various situations and sites in Western Europe.

Does a moment in which a technician on an ordinary working day is enjoying his coffee and bun matter? Is tasting of any importance? Social scientists who have investigated the topic have had different opinions. It has been argued by David Howes, an anthropologist of the senses, that “sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression,” (2003: xi). He has insisted further that “[it is] the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted”. (Ibid.) Is it? “One ought not make grand claims for the inherent importance of this subject [taste practices],” has been pointed out more modestly by the historian of science and technology Steven Shapin (2012a: 50). In regard to taste practices of wine and their vocabularies, he has added, “it’s only wine and only words, it might be said, and in the grand scheme of things, that’s undeniably right”. (Ibid.)
Independent of whether tasting is fundamental or trivial, “big” or “small”, in the world “out there”, it is an object that is investigated in the social sciences. Tasting is made relevant or irrelevant, in this or that way, as it gets tied up with conceptual concerns and theoretical interests in the research practices that anthropologists like Howes, and historians of science and technology like Shapin, engage in.

Why tasting and taste matters:
from structuring society to knowing an object

Tasting and taste have been studied in terms of a variety of matters. Consider the following three examples. Between 1963 and 1967, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu asked 1,217 people living in Paris, Lyon and a small village in the countryside in France what kind of food they ate and how they ate it. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data that he gathered, Bourdieu wrote the book *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (2010 [1979]), which has become the most widely circulated social scientific publication on taste. In it, Bourdieu analyses “the propensity and capacity to appropriate” (2010: 169) food and other objects, which he calls “taste”, in terms of their capacity to create relations between people with similar income and education, and distinction from others — to form social classes and structure society.

The anthropologist Paul Stoller, in contrast, during his fieldwork among Songhay people in Niger in the early 1980s, paid attention to an utterly ugly-tasting soup he was served by a Songhay woman he stayed with. This incident made the anthropologist reconsider the research of his discipline and point out the striking lack of attention to the senses up to that time. He co-authored a fervent essay with Cheryl Olkes — “The taste of ethnographic things” (1989) — which would become foundational for an entire field: an anthropology of the senses. In the essay, the instance of the ugly-tasting soup is taken as an entry point into a layer of social reality, taste, that tends to be forgotten by
anthropologists who often come from “the West” where sight is the hegemonic sense that becomes trained and elaborated, whereas taste is crucial among Songhay people.

Differently again, in the 1990s in France, the pragmatist sociologist Geneviève Teil studied how wine critics make judgments about the quality of wine by sampling wine in, for example, standardised wine tasting sessions; and how wine lovers were taught to enjoy a “grand vin” through instructions that were provided to them in wine guides. For instance, they were advised to spit out wine after swallowing, because this “carr[ied] the taster away into the domain of subjectivity”, as one of the guides put it (quoted in Teil, 2009: 118). In the papers and books Teil subsequently published, she takes tasting and taste as an illuminating example of how, in practice, knowledge about an object (and its quality) is constructed in particular non-scientific practices, and how attachments to objects come about.

As I started this research project, I intended to investigate moments in which something “tastes good” as a moment of value, as a “good”. I began by focusing on tasting. As it turned out, tasting itself required theorisation before moments in which something “tastes good” could be conceptualised as a “good” — which is, thus, what the thesis has become about. It offers an investigation into tasting. Rather than using tasting as a vehicle through which to understand the formation of social classes or attachments to objects, it turns tasting itself into the object of study.

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1 Such a research project would have been part of a broader collective endeavour to practice a social science that does not critique, but rather articulates “the good” by studying it. Scholars working in this vein have investigated the enactment of a “good” in practice, repertoires of qualifying an object as “good”, or techniques people develop of bringing about “good moments”. For examples, see Pols (2006), Thévenot (2002), and Gomart & Hennion (1999).
Taking a material semiotic approach

The thesis takes an approach called material semiotics to accomplish this study of tasting. Material semiotics is best described as a “set of sensitivities” (Mol, 2010), a way of asking questions and pursuing them in a particular way, which has grown out of Actor-Network-Theory.

The first important step is to not know what the object is that one investigates and what reality is made of more generally. This implies also not taking for granted big and abstract entities like “the social” and “power”, and social-scientific categories such as the distinction between “macro” and “micro”.

In a second step, one takes a case that — if sensible and feasible — one studies ethnographically. In this process one attends to how entities co-constitute each other in socio-material process and practices. Michel Callon and Bruno Latour’s paper “Unscrewing the big Leviathan” (1981) exemplifies how this is done. Callon and Latour start off by turning the distinction between macro- and micro-actors into an issue to be puzzled about. They ask: How does a micro-actor become a macro-actor? (279) They then look at a case, namely the company Electricity of France (EDF). They trace how this actor established itself as a macro-actor in the 1970s when EDF tried to launch an electric vehicle. Callon and Latour describe how EDF painted a vision for the future — a society in which happiness and quality of life had replaced the doomed all-out consumption of post-war society —, and established the replacement of the internal combustion engine through an electric vehicle as the road to this future. Callon and Latour argue that rather than simply being a “macro-actor”, EDF, through a long process of convincing others of the importance of the electric vehicle established itself as such. They add that a macro-actor remains such only as long as the premises it establishes are not questioned. In the case of EDF and the electric vehicle, EDF’s competitor Renault did question EDF’s premises. It redid all the calculations EDF had made, got other expert opinions, revisited the records and showed that the idea of the electric vehicle had been an empty promise. In the end, the electric vehicle never came into being.
In a third step, as one studies how entities co-constitute each other in socio-material processes and practices, one also attends to how this occurs differently in different sets of practices. For example, Annemarie Mol’s study *The Body Multiple* (2002) investigates a disease called arteriosclerosis. Mol engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in a hospital in the Netherlands and observed what happened there on a day-to-day basis. In the outpatient clinic, the ethnographer witnessed vascular surgeons diagnosing atherosclerosis by asking questions of patients who came to them because their legs hurt; by looking at the colour and texture of the skin on the patients’ legs; and by putting their hands on places where the patients’ leg arteries should be palpable and attempting to feel whether or not the arteries pulsated with each heartbeat. Elsewhere in the hospital, Mol did not witness the same phenomenon. In the department of pathology, Mol was invited by pathologists to look through a microscope at a vessel cross-section that had been made earlier by preparing a dead body, in order to see the thickening of the intima (the structuring of the artery wall). Mol suggests that what atherosclerosis “is” depends on the particular set of tools and techniques that make it visible, audible, tangible, knowable and treatable in a given instance. Atherosclerosis, one disease, she argues, is enacted in different versions in medical practices. In the two examples described above — feeling arteries pulsating in patient’s legs and looking at a vessel cross-section made from a dead body — these exclude each other.

Taking the material semiotic approach outlined above, this thesis starts by *not* knowing what tasting is. It seeks to *study* “tasting” and investigates the following research question:

*How is tasting done in various practices?*
Studying “tasting” while not knowing what “tasting” is

There is a tension in this approach. While it is possible to theoretically “not know” what tasting is, setting out and studying it requires, very practically, “to know” where to go and what to observe, which in the case of tasting is itself not very obvious. (What kind of activities to count as tasting? Putting a sample of cheese in one’s mouth? Adding salt to a dish? Saying that something is a “bit bland”? All three of these? All of these equally or one more than the others?) The strategy that I followed was to engage in ethnographic fieldwork (Amann & Hirschauer, 1997; Emerson et al., 2011) in different Western European countries, choosing different situations and sites in which people “sensually engaged” with food and drinks — in the widest sense possible —, to observe what was going on.

Between 2009 and 2013, I observed what happened in sensory science laboratories, and in particular the experiments that were set up, and spoke to professors, research managers, research assistants and research subjects. On the side, I read publications and attended conferences in the field of sensory science. Also, I went to restaurants and observed catered events. I peeled red bell peppers next to professional chefs working under time pressure in stainless steel kitchens. In the lounges, in the late morning hours and in the early afternoon, when it was quiet, restaurant owners outlined for me the details of managing a gastronomic enterprise. Food consultants provided me further insights into gastronomy and food production processes. From staff members of restaurants, sous-chefs, cooking apprentices and waitresses, I learned about feet that became sore from walking, lobsters that accidentally had been left cooking for two hours, and dinners in the early morning hours after work. I dined out with restaurant critics in venues that had just opened. I ate with the groups for whom the caterers whom I happened to follow around catered meals and snacks. I also taped and wrote field notes about my friends and family as they — we — were eating out. My friends let me observe and join in as they cooked dinner at home after work. A food photographer allowed me to join and take pictures of him taking
pictures of a salmon spinach pastry dish in a darkroom in his apartment building’s basement. Moreover, I got up early and observed how cheese was made in a dairy in the mountains, attended several presentations of cheese production processes in front of an “interested public”, and helped to sell cheese in a small cheese shop. I observed what happened in small cafes and take-aways — Fish & Chips shops in the UK, places selling Döner Kebab and falafel sandwiches in Austria — and spent time in institutions as divergent as hospitals and nunneries. Finally, I was one of the tourists in front of whom experimental food archaeologists in Hampton Court Palace cooked dishes based on five-line recipes that had been transmitted from the times of Henry VIII.; and entered a zoo’s stainless steel kitchen that resembled those I had seen in restaurants, nunneries and hospitals. The only difference was that the zoo’s refrigerator did not cool down cheese and other familiar food products, but mice, bugs and worms.

In these different situations and sites, and sometimes even within one situation or site, the language spoken was not always English. The breakfast described earlier is a case in point. Some of members of the film crew, as they came to see the buffet that had been set up for them, in Dutch said, “Lekker, jongens!” [Tasty, guys!] Some of them had flown in from South-Africa. They told me in English that, “The food is delicious! Especially the eggs!” The mother tongue of Jonna, one of the caterers, was Dutch. She had no difficulties explaining to me in English — my Dutch, at that point in time, was rudimentary — the details she paid attention to when setting up the buffet. Peter, the caterer who owned the business, spoke Dutch as well, but English more often. He had migrated to the Netherlands only ten years before from Ireland where he had worked previously and grown up. (The notes that I took of the happenings also contained words like “herausklappen” in German, my mother tongue. In the midst of the rain, wind and cold, I had forgotten the equivalent word in English for describing the activity of moving to the outside the set of 5 stairs that had been fixed at the rear of the van.)
The following chapters bear traces of the diversity of languages one encounters during fieldwork in Western Europe. The chapters stay close to the language that was spoken in the field. One of the chapters is on “taste in humans” studied by sensory scientists who publish their findings in the global academic language English. Other chapters start from moments in which something in German “schmeckt gut” [tastes good]. And another one brings together practices that advertise themselves in English and French as “tasting,” moments in which something “schmeckt gut,” and situations in which the food “war gut” [was good]. These language differences are more than just interesting to observe. Whilst it might be possible to translate one word into another language, the worlds that come with a word do not necessarily map neatly onto each other. Take for instance the couple “security/segurança”, one of the ethnographic case studies provided in *Words in Motion* (Gluck & Tsing, 2009). In the US and in Brazil in the 1950s and 60s, security and segurança had in common the problem of a global communist threat to the nation. The content of “national security” was different in the two countries, however. In Brazil, but not in the US, it included a concern with economic development, segurança e desenvolvimento [security and development]. The associated practices differed as well. In Brazil, “securing” implied regulating markets, capital and ownership as well as searching for unreliable communist citizens within the state territory, rather than only the latter as in the US (Abraham, 2009). In the following chapters I will use the gap between words and the worlds they carry for engaging and interfering with literature on tasting and taste.

Next to the text in black and white, I will also provide a selection of pictures that I took during fieldwork. The pictures in chapter 2 evoke the space in which tasting happens in sensory science laboratories. In chapter 3, they index what a dish that “schmeckt gut” [tastes good] becomes related to. In chapter 4, they

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2 For a discussion of translation as an epistemological space in anthropology, see Hanks & Severi (2014); for an investigation into *chupar* and *comer*, two Spanish words for *eating*, that sheds light on ontological difference, see Port & Mol (2014); and for a lexicon that brings out how philosophical concepts such as the German *Leib* (often translated as “lived body”) and the English *experience*, are ultimately untranslatable into other languages, see Cassin et al. (2014).
point at what informants bring up as mattering for their sensual engagements with food. And chapter 5 contains pictures of activities configuring tasting. David Howes, the anthropologists of the senses discussed previously, set out to study taste and other senses with the hope that this might “liberate us from the hegemony which sight has for so long exercised over our own culture’s social, intellectual, and aesthetic life” (1991: 4) He saw taste as “the Other” of vision. In contrast, I will invite you to use seeing for the aim of tasting.

**Turning what is taking for granted into issues to investigate**

As I started my ethnographic fieldwork, I also began reading what others had written about tasting and taste. Tasting, I came to realise, had been accounted for by social scientists, in a very specific way. “Sensation,” Howes had stated, “is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression”. (Howes, 2003: xi). What had others said? Jon Holtzman, another anthropologist, had written that through taste people “view and experience their world and (...) are constituted as persons within it” (Holtzman, 2009: 5). “Taste,” Steven Shapin had written, “is one among many modes of subjectivity” (Shapin, 2012b: 172) where like objectivity, subjectivity is “a knowledge-making mode” (170).

As a person is tasting food or drinks, according to these views, a *physiological response* takes place in the person’s body. At the same time, the person multi-sensorially *experiences* qualities of the object that is tasted. This is influenced by the material, cultural and social environment — the *context* in which a person finds him- or herself. The outcome of this process is that a person *knows* about the object that has been tasted and through it has made sense of the world he or she lives in.
Tasting, in the social science literature, schematically looked like this:

But was this what was going on as the technician enjoyed his espresso and bun for breakfast, and other moments that I was observing? Rather than taking for granted big and abstract entities mobilised in previous social scientific accounts and studies, I started wondering instead… “Physiological response”? What exactly are we talking about here? And experience? How do I recognise an “experience” when I come across one during fieldwork? How does a “context” come about and what does it look like? And is “knowing” really what is at stake as somebody enjoys a delicious breakfast? This kind of quasi-naive not-knowing is what I invite you to do with me throughout the next chapters.
What is to come

Each of the chapters of this thesis engages with one taken-for-granted entity and unpacks it by juxtaposing it with ethnographic observations of sensual engagements with food and drinks within one set of practice (or in the last case, a juxtaposition of three) observed in one type of situation or site.

After this introduction, the second chapter focuses on the so-called “physiological response”, which in ethnographies on food and the senses has received little attention so far. Drawing on a set of sensitivities developed in ethnographies of scientific and medical practices, the chapter investigates practices of sensory science research on “taste in humans”. It will explore in detail two ethnographically observed laboratory experiments. The first one investigated flavour perception in chocolate liquids, and the second studied satiation in equally palatable sweet and savoury meals. The chapter analyses how tasting is done and what kind of bodily response is enacted in research practices.

The third chapter revisits this by focusing on practices of eating out in restaurants and catered events. Gastronomic professionals explained to me that tasting was a “multi-sensory experience”. It investigates in detail a family celebration that was held in a restaurant in Austria. The chapter traces the micro-practices the family members engaged in and through which they became part of moments in which something “schmeckt gut” [tastes good]. Starting from the German “schmeckt gut,” it analyses how these moments came about. It considers how the “tasting” that preceded these moments becomes ordered and organised in particular ways as people arranged their bodies, foodstuff, eating, other bodies and objects.

Moving on from the micro-practices that people engage in during eating, the fourth chapter inquires into “the context” in which tasting takes place. It does so by investigating the everyday life practices of working and living in a hospital in Switzerland. It analyses what doctors, patients and nurses brought up as the difference that made a difference for their sensual engagements with food. At the same time, it investigates how three studies on “taste”, “eating”
and “tasting” from sociology, folklore studies and science and technology studies contextualise sensual engagements with food and drinks. It teases out how the authors of these studies have not made the same decisions on what matters for sensual engagements with food and drinks, and three different contexts have been developed in the studies. As none of these helped to make sense of the ethnographic observations I made, the chapter develops a fourth context.

The fifth chapter takes issue with the idea of a “knowing subject,” the fourth entity that tends to be taken for granted in social science research on tasting and taste. The chapter contrasts three different sets of practices: wine tasting in a non-professional way (studied by Geneviève Teil), mundane eating practices that I witnessed among my friends in Austria and religious practices that I observed ethnographically in a Benedictine convent in Switzerland. The chapter suggests that a “knowing subject” and knowing is only an outcome of wine tasting practices, while in the other two sets of goings-on something very different is happening.

What to conclude from these disparate investigations of tasting? In chapter six, I again reconsider otherwise taken-for-granted entities, this time to contrast them with the alternative picture that emerges from my study of how tasting is done: tasting becomes a composite object. I end by sketching the avenues that tasting as a composite opens up for new research on “the good”.

References


