Tasting in mundane practices: Ethnographic interventions in social science theory
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Abstract:
Sometimes there are moments in which people in German state that something schmeckt gut [tastes good]. Taking the expression literally, this paper investigates how people do the “tasting” that gives rise to such expressions. The paper focuses on a family celebration in a restaurant to consider how participants variously order “tasting” in three schmeckt gut moments as a process of experiencing, socialising, or processing. The paper argues that while it is possible to analyse how a person simultaneously experiences sensual qualities inherent in a particular dish, socialises with others, and processes food, these aspects are not equally relevant for the people involved in the “tasting”. Different modes of ordering “tasting” can exist next to each other. The paper suggests investigation into various possible modes of ordering “tasting”, and their shifting relevance.

What is going on when something schmeckt gut?
Sometimes there are moments in which German speakers state that something schmeckt gut. Here is one of them that I observed during my ethnographic fieldwork into sensual engagements with food and drinks:
Field notes, 17th June 2011, Gasthof Nibelungenhof, Traismauer, Matthias’ family celebration, soup

The waitress has positioned a bowl in front of Volker, one of the family members who have joined the celebration, before moving on and serving the next two guests. From the opposite side of the table I recognise that the bowl is filled with tomato soup. And so is mine. Two savoury puffs float in the red liquid. In the middle, there is a whip of cream. Parsley has been sprinkled on top. Volker bends over the bowl in front of him. He takes up his spoon, immerses it into the soup and stirs. He fills the spoon, brings it to his mouth and puts it into his mouth. He swallows, and takes another spoon. And another one. “Mhmnmnm…” I hear him murmur. “Die Suppe schmeckt gut.” [The soup tastes good.] I agree with him, “Die schmeckt echt super.” [It tastes really great.] “Rainer [the chef] just makes the best tomato soup in the world,” Volker says and continues eating. The bowls become emptier and emptier. In the end, Volker tilts his bowl and scrapes out the last bit of soup. He puts it into his mouth, leans back and sighs, “Mmmm… I had been really hungry. I skipped lunch today in order to have enough space in my belly for every one of Rainer’s five delicious courses.” And after a moment, reaching over the table to the menu, he adds, “Do you know what we’ll get as a main course? I’m looking forward to it already…”

Initially it seemed obvious to me what was happening in such moments. In English, schmecken means to taste in the sense of sensing food (not trying or sampling), and gut translates into good. Our exchange encompassed a moment in which something tasted good. While this expression is used by German speakers, I came to realise as I observed and participated in more eating events in which other languages were spoken that other languages use different expressions. English native speakers stated that something was delicious, while Dutch diners said that it was lekker [was tasty/nice].12 Neither of the two languages mobilised the verb to taste.

12 For expressions used during dinner table conversations in English, see Wiggins & Potter (2003); for an analysis of the use of “lekker” and in particular the question “Is het lekker?” [Is it tasty?] in Dutch, see Mol (2014); and for an analysis of German dinner table conversations, see Keppler (1994).
At the same time, gastronomic professionals explained to me how they catered for their diners. They hired chefs who were able to create surprising flavour combinations, employed attentive service staff, arranged tables and chairs to provide a welcoming feeling, and played classical music in a major key in the background in their restaurant or catering venues. In interviews, done in English, these professionals stated that “tasting is a multi-sensory experience”. Did this capture what was going on moments in which something schmeckt gut? I was not so sure, so started to investigate moments such as these.

This paper is the outcome of this investigation. It provides an analysis of moments at restaurants and at catered events in which something schmeckt gut by investigates the micro-practices that people engage in as they eat out. More specifically, it analyses how people craft such moments through ordering and organising their sensual engagements with food and drinks in specific ways. Taking the German expression that something schmeckt gut literally, the analysis draws on the gap that opens up in translation into English. It uses it as an epistemological space for theorising this organising and ordering of sensual relations to food and drinks as “tasting”. The paper, starting from this particular German expression, investigates how “tasting” is done in eating out practices in Western Europe. It follows a line of studies on how “tasting” and “taste” are done and what “tasting” and “taste” do in “the West” (Hennion, 2004; Manzo, 2010; Bentia, 2014), and brings it together with work on “tasting” and “taste” outside “the West”.

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that I undertook between 2009 and 2013 in different Western European countries, where the main language spoken was English, Dutch, German or Swiss-German. During fieldwork

13 The notion of “ordering” is taken from John Law (1994) who has developed it as a way of ethnographically studying what Michel Foucault called “discourses” and defined as “forms of strategic arranging that are intentional but do not necessarily have a subject” (Foucault, 1981: 95 quoted in Law, 1994: 21).

14 The analysis builds upon a tradition of theorising through and investigating translation. For a lexicon of words and the worlds they carry in different places, see Gluck & Tsing (2009); for a dictionary of philosophical concepts in European languages that cannot be translated, see Cassin (2014); and a special issue on translation as an “epistemological space”, see HAU (2014).
I went to sites such as restaurants and catered events, where people ate food that had been prepared by professional chefs. The restaurants ranged from low-budget inns for tourists to high-end internationally ranked restaurants. The catered events included Bar Mitzvahs, film shootings, receptions, banquets, conferences and private dinner parties. In the following, I will focus on one event in particular, the family celebration introduced in the beginning of the paper. It took place in June 2010 in the East of Austria, in Petsy and Rainer Melichar’s restaurant called *Gasthaus Nibelungenhof*. A person whom I will call Matthias had invited his extended family to celebrate the successful completion of his PhD in technical engineering.¹⁵ Before the event I had interviewed Rainer, the chef, several times and observed in the kitchen how he prepared dishes that his wife then served to “the guests”, as Rainer insisted on calling them. I also followed the event’s organisation process, including the negotiations that took place between the chef and the host before and after the event. During the event I observed what was going on around me and used the bathroom as a separate space where I could take notes. After the celebration, I contacted some of the family members to follow up on comments they had made.

In the next section, I will analyse a first moment in which something *schmeckt gut* and bring out how this was the outcome of people engaging in particular activities. These organised “tasting” as experiencing. Section Three adds a second moment in which something *schmeckt gut* and teases out how the diners’ activities differed. As a consequence, “tasting” was ordered as socialising. I will argue that while it is possible to analyse how a person, as he or she takes a bite, sensually experiences qualities inherent in a food item and socialises with others around him or her, these two aspects might not be equally relevant for the people involved in “tasting”. Section Four describes a third moment in which something *schmeckt gut* involved “tasting” organised as a process of processing,

¹⁵ I gained access to the event through my partner, who was one of the invited family members. The participants have been anonymised and the names - except Petsy and Rainer Melichar - are invented. Thanks to all of them, Matthias in particular; to Rainer Melichar and all the other chefs who shared with me their knowledge and practices despite a constant scarcity of time and the pressure of running a business profitably; and all other informants.
and analyses how different modes of ordering relate to each other. I will conclude by suggesting investigation into other possible modes of ordering “tasting” and the movement between them.

Ordering “tasting” as experiencing

Let me take you to the Gasthaus Nibelungenhof and introduce field notes from a second situation that I observed during the celebration:

Field notes, 17th June 2011, Gasthof Nibelungenhof, Traismauer, Matthias’ celebration, main course

The waitress has left again after having served Matthias’ uncle, a man in his 50s sitting to my left, and me. In front of us, on the table sit two plates. Each of them holds a rectangular piece of welsh catfish daubed with red, green, and orange sauces, balanced on top of roasted vegetables, broccoli, cauliflower and, garlic.

Matthias’ uncle takes up his cutlery. He cuts into the fish, pushes a piece onto the fork, adds a broccoli floret and puts it into his mouth. He chews and swallows. I take up my fork and start with a piece of the roasted cauliflower. “How is it?” Matthias’ father has approached us from behind to check if everything is alright. The uncle and I reassure him, “Excellent!” “Delicious!” The host leaves again. “The fish flesh is very tender,” the uncle continues, “And it doesn’t have any of that long, flat, nearly sludgy flavour that sweet freshwater fish have sometimes…” “Mhm,” I agree with him. “With the vegetables and the seasoning, it becomes round. Only the garlic is a bit too strong…” I don’t agree with him: “Ah, I like it…” The uncle pushes a clove of garlic to the rim of the plate and takes another bite, and so do I.

At the end of the course, the conversation returns to the food. The uncle concludes, “Also dieser Gang hat mir sehr gut geschmeckt. [This course has tasted very good to me.]” “Mir auch.” [To me as well.] He points to the plate in front of him which, except for a couple of leftover garlic cloves is now empty revealing its pattern. “Look,
black sprinkles! They resemble the sauces that were on top of the fish! The plate even fits the painting…” I follow his gaze. On the other side of the room on the wall hangs a rectangular canvas. It is painted black with three silver vertical stripes.

What happened in this situation? The process of eating in which the uncle and I engaged involved taking a first bite, and noting qualities in the main course and its side dish — the “tenderness” and a “lack of flatness” in a piece of fish, the intensity of garlic in the vegetables and their seasoning. After taking a bite, the uncle excluded the cloves of garlic from the vegetables because they were “too strong”. The meal, including the sprinkles of the sauces on top of the dish, and its form and presentation, were commented upon and judged about. At the end, the uncle directed my attention to the design of the plate and the surrounding artwork. That the dish had gut geschmeckt was related to qualities inherent in the food together with the environment in which it was eaten.  

A couple of days before the event, Rainer, who had prepared the fish course in his kitchen, had told me about the considerations that went into creating such a culinary masterpiece. In order to provide an extraordinary richness in taste, he explained and demonstrated, he seasoned dishes with sauces that were extracts of vegetables and fruits which he called “succos”. I recognised that he was a chef who combined and contrasted flavours and textures to create an “exciting multi-sensory experience”. A chef who is now retired from working in a Michelin-starred restaurant conveyed this approach to me in an interview, as did the chefs in Michelin-starred restaurants in Britain and Germany, whom Christel Lane studied in her more extensive analysis of the organisation of fine dining (2014). The editor of the culinary guide Michelin Germany explained to Lane the expectations regarding ‘taste’ in this realm: “The dish has to taste of the main/basic ingredient; there has to be a harmonious combination of the tastes;
the contrasts in taste made have to be helpful to the dish… The more tastes are introduced, the more difficult it is to do it successfully, but great chefs can do it.” (178; my emphasis) Yet, as Fine’s ethnography of kitchen work (2009) in the upper portion of Minnesota restaurants carefully depicts, doing aesthetics and creating culinary masterpieces is not only a daily achievement, and one that is subject to constraints — of time, space and (not least) money. The biggest predicament for the non-elite, trade-school chefs Fine observed and interviewed was that they sometimes served food they knew was “bad food” (2009: 183). Rainer is an interesting case, as he sits in between elite and trade-school chefs. He previously worked with famous Michelin-starred chefs, but then fell in love with Petsy. He now manages the family business in the countryside that Petsy inherited from her parents with her, which is subject to more constraints than elite venues. For example, Rainer came to invent his system of “succos” to maintain the need for only one dishwasher and avoid a big financial loss for the business.

What I want to point out here is that in the situation of assessing the intensity of garlic a set of particular activities lead into a moment in which something *schmeckt gut*, including discussing qualities in food, discarding a clove of garlic to improve the side dish, and directing attention towards qualities in food and the environment in which it is consumed. In this situation, saying that food *schmeckt gut* expresses a perceptual experience. The “tasting” that has preceded the moment has been ordered and organised as a process of experiencing qualities inherent in food and the environment in which it is consumed.18

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17 For an historical analysis of the invention of “the restaurant” and political ideas of eating together resonating with those of living together in France around the French revolution, see Spang (2000).

18 Vanina Leschziner (2006) has noted that the idea of a dish possessing inherent qualities relies on a particular, Modern epistemic configuration (Foucault, 1982). This configuration is the outcome of three shifts that happened before the 19th century. First, eating became a practice independent from religion. Earlier it had been organised by religious fasting calendars. Secondly, science started studying things and nature as having constitutive properties instead of being positioned according to resemblances within the Great Chain of Being designed by God, which spans from heaven to earth. With the shift came a pursuit of analytic explanations and the development of experimental science. Thirdly, cookery became an independent normative realm having its own set of rules. Previously, it was a subcategory within medicine, hygiene and dietetics. Subsequently, being a “chef” became not just a profession, but
The situation of the uncle and me eating is strikingly similar to situations that David Sutton describes in his book *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001). He had conducted in fieldwork on the Greek island Kalmynos. On several occasions, Kalymnians called a particularly delicious batch of bean stew “Turkish Delight!” Describing a bean stew by using the name of a soft dessert, according to Sutton, directed attention to the stew’s tender texture as well as the sweet flavour of the beans. When cooking, people often encouraged others to attend to odours of the food they were preparing. This happened with a noisy intake of breath through the nose and the instruction to “listen to that smell” (99). Also, island inhabitants identified the failure to perceive an element of a dish in terms of that element “not being hearable” (99). Other ethnographers have mapped this type of verbal expression more systematically. For example, Joel Kuipers (1986) has recorded the taste terms used to express their sensual perceptions among Weyéwa people living on the western island of Sumba in Indonesia in the early 1980s. Gunter Senft (2011) studied changes in the lexicon of perceptual experiences expressed by the Kilivila-speaking Trobriand Islanders of Papua
New Guinea since 1982. The taste terms that he had recorded in the 1980s included *sumakenia* (sweet, rich, tasty), *payuyu* (sour, bitter, unripe), *yayana/yayani* (bitter, hot, harsh), *yona* (salt, salty, saltwater), *bolova* (stale, insipid), *gegeda* (biting, hurting), *gasisi* (fierce, wild, terrible, bad); and *bwena* (good) and *gaga* (bad). The vocabulary, despite an increasing influence of English, had changed little between 1982 and 2008, Senft concluded.19

The situation of “tasting” at the family celebration I studied thus resonates with previous findings about multisensory metaphors and terms that are used by people to express their sensations and direct other people’s attention toward qualities of food. Based on such observations, David Sutton has recently questioned the idea of taste, embedded in the Western model of the five senses, that taste is a sense that is separate from other senses. He has argued, instead, that “taste [is] an actual multi-sensory experience” (2010: 211).20 In contrast to the situations Sutton observed, “multi-sensory experience” is an emic category in the event described above used by Rainer and other chefs whom I interviewed. It describes the attention to and perceptions of qualities of dishes the gastronomic professionals expect diners to have.

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19 Taste terms were recorded as early as in 1904 by C.S. Myers during an expedition of Cambridge anthropologists to the islands of Torres Strait (Myers, 1904). For an exploration of US chefs’ repertoires for talking about the aesthetics of a dish, see Fine (1995).

20 “Experience” also figured as a key notion in another context in ethnographies on sensuous relations to food. Paul Stoller, in “The Taste of Ethnographic Things” (1989), a publication that was crucial in opening up the field for ethnographic research into the topic, advocated for a “tasteful ethnography” which, rather than providing “totalized investigations of the Songhay, the Nuer, or the Trobriander”, attends to “the complexities of the individuals social experience” (29). In this case, the notion allows a shift from whole cultures to individuals in ethnographic research.
Organising “tasting” differently: Socialising

Not everybody engaged in a discussion about “flatness” and “roundness” during the family celebration at the Gasthaus Nibelungenhof. Let me introduce field notes from a third situation that occurred during the event:

Field notes, 17th June 2011, Gasthof Nibelungenhof, Traismauer, Matthias’ celebration, dessert

Matthias, sitting at one end of the table, is holding in his hand a glass plate on which a piece of Sachertorte, a chocolate cake, lies next to a small fork. Matthias had just finished distributing pieces of the cake after cutting it with the help of his youngest nephew and his aunt.

The cake was a graduation present for Matthias from his aunt. She had told me during the main course how, over the last three days, she had baked the sponge, cut it into layers, added jam between the layers, coated them with chocolate and added the decoration formed out of almond paste on top: two figurines — penguins wearing hats like those worn in American graduation ceremonies —, roses, and a wish written in brown on white. “For my only and most favourite nephew!” the aunt said proudly. Together with two other home-made cakes it had formed the “cake buffet”, the first dessert course that would be followed by another one, ice cream, made by the chef.

Matthias takes up his fork, cuts a piece of the cake, puts it on his fork and in his mouth. He chews. I am sitting next to Matthias, holding a plate that contains another piece of the Sachertorte and an almond paste rose. I cut off a piece and put it in my mouth. Matthias swallows. Then, he says, “Ich sag’ kurz der Tante, wie gut ihre Sachertorte schmeckt. [I will quickly let auntie know how good her cake tastes.]”

In this process of eating, a person and the ethnographer took bites, in this case, of a cake. After having taken the first bite, Matthias got up to tell the person who had made the cake, his aunt, that the cake schmeckt gut. That it schmeckt gut was related to the effort the aunt had put into baking the cake. For the aunt,
baking a cake that took her three days was a way of showing that she loved, as she put it, her “only and most favourite nephew”. Matthias demonstrated by getting up that he was a “good” nephew, appreciating the work and effort of his aunt. In this moment “love went through the stomach”, “Liebe ging durch den Magen”, as the aunt described later, in an interview to me, her baking for Matthias. Through the aunt baking a cake for her nephew, and by his taking a bite of it, the nephew and the aunt related to each other.

Following this example, activities such as offering a cake as a present, taking a bite thereof and getting up to express praise can also lead into a moment in which something *schmeckt gut*. In this situation and through the prior activities that something *schmeckt gut* becomes related to the love that a family member has put into the preparation of a food item. In this situation, that the cake *schmeckt gut* is an expression of a social relation one family member entertains with another family member. The “tasting” that lead into it and results from this moments had been organised this time as a process of *socialising*.

As I was analysing the ethnographic data, I could not help remarking on the resonances between this situation and others that have been observed by Jon Holtzman during his fieldwork among Samburu kettle herders living in the North of Kenya. They are described by Holtzman in *Uncertain Tastes* (2009). In the past, the author points out, Samburu people lived from a diet of meat, blood and milk that was punctuated by spells of food scarcity. Nowadays, Holtzman
observed that during the time he lived with Samburu, maize (which is called “grey food” by Samburu people) and tea were staple food items. Preparing, distributing and consuming food were organised within households and divided between husband and wife in particular ways. While women had no recognised political power, at home they were responsible for providing all the other family members with a share of food, and they distributed it according to their own idea of fairness. Some women had husbands who were much older than they were, and some of them drank and misused family resources. In response, some of these women provided their husbands with only little food — starved them, Holtzman observed (2009: 88). Holtzman took a picture of one of these couples. “An old, thin man with a young, well-nourished wife” is the caption that is printed below the reproduction of the photograph on page 89 of the book. The wife’s cheeks are round and, in the black-and-white picture, stick out as white. His are fallen in and remain black. In this case, the lack of love went through the stomach too. The woman did not love her husband enough to provide him with enough food.

In his turn, David Howes (2003) has observed in the Massim river region in Papua New Guinea how hosts of marriages or mortuary feasts did not eat any of the food they prepared themselves, and distributed it to their guests instead. Howes suggested that among Massim people, a “restriction of taste”, as he puts it, was crucial in deriving one’s identity and maintaining a social position. In a similar way, Adam Chau (2008) has witnessed that in rural Shaanbei, in north-central China ‘spicy liquor’ or ‘burning liquor’ (lajiuj or shaojiu) served in small, white porcelain shot cups during temple festivals, contributed to the production of “honghuo” — social heat or red-hot sociality.\textsuperscript{21}

The situation of Matthias and me having a piece of chocolate cake thus relates to a second set of findings. The consumption of food items that have been baked or cooked by family members for others creates and recreates relations between the people pertaining to a specific group. It crafts their identities, social

\textsuperscript{21} In a similar way as Chau has analysed the production of a “red-hot” sociality, Janeja’s ethnography (2010) provides insights into the creation and maintenance of “the everyday normal” in middle-class households in Calcutta and Dhaka.
positions, and relations between them. Sensual relation to food, this literature brings out, organises “the Social” that is assembled and reassembled constantly. What is particularly striking about the situation I have described with the cake is the activity of taking a bite incited the nephew to get up and thank his aunt, to actualise his relation with her.

Introducing a special issue on taste and other senses, Elisabeth Hsu (2008) has recently pointed out that ethnographic research into the topic has reached an understanding of “there being a ‘mutuality’ between social relations and the material world, where mutuality is a concept [we can use] (...) to overcome the historically given separation between anthropological research into the social world and material objects” (433f.). I agree with Hsu that a separation of research into “the social world” and “material objects” is counterproductive. It is more fruitful to bring together different approaches to tasting and taste, for instance by studying perceptual experiences and observing the recreation of social relations within a family through the consumption of food items. Yet, I would argue from the two situations I have presented in which something schmeckt gut, that in particular moments, not all of these aspects are equally relevant to the actors involved in them.

In the situation that involved the uncle, it was the garlic cloves which he had deemed “too strong” that became talked about and acted upon. He never brought up as an issue whether or not the chef had prepared the dish with passion and love. He also never referred to talking about flavours and other qualities inherent in a dish, which implied engaging with a stranger next to him, in terms of creating a social relation that had an effect on the dish “tasting good”. In a similar way, in the situation of Matthias and me having a piece of cake, what was brought up as a concern was the aunt and the gratefulness Matthias wanted to express towards her. We never talked about whether Matthias or I found the cake “too dry” or “too moist”. It was not the exciting flavour combination or the surprising design that matched the decoration on the table that had made the cake “tasting good”.

Thus, while it is possible to analytically combine an approach to tasting and taste that analyses how, as a person takes a bite of food, he or she experiences qualities that are inherent in food and socialises with others around him or her at the same time, the two moments in which something *schmeckt gut* exemplify how in practice and for the people involved in specific instances, there are differences in what is important to and acted upon by them. In the two moments described above, experiencing qualities of food did not automatically include socialising through it. Likewise, socialising through the cake did not involve experiencing its qualities. The “tasting” that people engaged in did not yield the same effect either. Matthias and his uncle both took a bite of food, but activities they subsequently engaged in next differed. The uncle discarded garlic that he deemed “too strong” in the dish. Matthias, in contrast, got up to thank his aunt. The two moments in which something *schmeckt gut* bring out how “tasting” is organised and ordered in different ways by actors involved in it.\(^\text{22}\)

**Processing as a third way of ordering “tasting” and the co-existence of difference**

Let me introduce field notes of a fourth situation, because during the family celebration at the *Gasthaus Nibelungenhof* there were participants who engaged with the food they ate in yet another, different way. More specifically, there was the grand-mother.

*Field notes, 17th June 2011, Gasthof Nibelungenhof, Traismauer, Matthias’ celebration, after the dessert*

Matthias’ grandmother and her daughter, Matthias’ aunt, are sitting a couple of seats further down the table from me and Matthias. A walking stick leans against the chair of the older woman. Earlier I had noticed that she had had the fish as a main course. She had been loading her fork with some of the fish and then directing it slowly towards

\[^{22}\text{For an analysis of how a political movement such as the Slow Food movement organises tasting and systematically creates tensions between the what, who and how of tasting in order to advocate for change, see Bentia (2014).}\]
her mouth. Her hand had not been steady and the fish had been about to fall off. Finally it had reached her mouth. She had chewed and swallowed. She had then filled the fork with some of the vegetables and directed it towards her mouth. Again slowly. The hand had trembled and a piece of broccoli had fallen down. Finally, the remaining vegetables had reached her mouth. She had chewed and swallowed them.

Now, she is watching the goings-on around her. I get up and join her. “How are you Mrs. Kainzbauer?” I ask. “So, so…” she answers, then adds, “Guat hot’s g’schmeckt, ned? [It tasted good, didn’t it?]” I agree with her, “Jo, s’Essa war wirklich spitze!” [Yes, the food was really extraordinary.] Her daughter, having overheard the exchange, adds, “Hod’s d’r g’schmeckt, Oma? [Did it taste to you, granny?]” The old woman nods while the younger one explains to me, “I had ordered the fish for her. Out of the three dishes on the menu it had been the easiest one for her to chew. She is wearing dentures, you see. She would have problems eating meat. At home, currently, when my husband and I have meat, she has a bigger portion of the side dish, or more of the soup with bread.” The daughter pauses and, after a moment, concludes, “Well, it’s very hu-

In this process of eating, a person was faced with the difficulties of getting food-stuffs to and into the body, of biting into it and chewing. More specifically, the physical act of eating required (what in medical language is called) shearing the mash and forming a bolus that then could be brought back to the rear of the mouth, swallowed, moved into the pharynx, the oesophagus and further into the digestive system. The grandmother, a person wearing dentures, an artificial device, and not being particularly agile anymore, had been ordered food by her daughter that would be the least challenging and dangerous to be exposed to. That the course had gut geschmeckt became related to the ability to chew the dish, and included the daughter who had chosen and ordered the food with the issue of chewing in mind.

No-one whose work I observed — neither Rainer, nor any of the other chefs and caterers, food consultants and marketers, restaurant owners and employ-

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chewing as an issue for the preparation or eating of food. Thus I contacted a General Practitioner (GP) after the event. She explained to me that Mrs Kainzbauer and many other elderly people faced a series of issues in the “oral processing” of food. Because of muscle loss, dentures often become loose. New ones can cost up to 6,000 Euros. The question of whether it is worth it to make this investment is a question that often comes up. Ill-fitting dentures make chewing painful, however, and diminish the range of food items that can be eaten by the wearer. As the GP put it, this affects the “quality of life” and can cause depression. Research on these issues, she said, is going on in gerodontology, the branch of medicine that deals with the oral health of elderly people.

In addition to the two sets of activities described in the previous sections, this third one can also lead into a moment in which something schmeckt gut. This set of activities involves not having to take out the denture in front of everybody else, and one person’s care of ordering a dish for another who wears dentures and is faced with the problems with eating they create. In this situation, that something schmeckt gut becomes related to dentures and the physical chewing of a dish. That something schmeckt gut is the expression of the practical achievement of processing edibles. The “tasting” that precedes the moment has been organised yet again differently, as processing food.23

What makes that something “schmeckt gut”: the fish is chewable with dentures

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23 For an analysis of the process of digestion that raises questions about agency, see Abrahamsson (2014). Mann et al. (2011) also studied the practical achievement of eating a meal using one’s fingers, which required re-theorizing the relations of “us” and “them”, “the West” and “the exotic Other”.
During the analysis of my field notes, this situation of dentures made me think of and reread Annemarie Mol’s fieldwork in a Dutch rehabilitation centre. In the facility, health-care professionals treated patients whose ability to swallow had been impaired during cerebrovascular accidents (Mol 2011). Speech therapists gave small exercises to the patients they were treating. First, the therapists assigned exercises through which the patients relearned to swallow their own saliva. Once the rehabilitants could handle this, the carer made the patients move on to “stuff”, in the beginning stuff that was “innocent” and would not harm the lungs if it slipped down the trachea instead of the esophagus, and then “real food.” Mol also described how in order to motivate a patient in this process, a speech therapist had asked what the patient craved. “Chocolate cake with berries!” the patient answered. Cake was still too dangerous to try out, the therapist assessed. If the cake ended up in the patient’s bronchi and then lungs, it would cause an infection. The speech therapist had thus organised chocolate pudding and a red fruit sauce. Encouraged and excited by the prospect of eating food items that resembled his favourite ones, the patient had dared to take up the scary step of swallowing “real food” for the first time, and managed it successfully. Similar situations have been observed by Jeannette Pols and Sarah Limburg (Forthcoming) in a group of patients who suffer from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive neurogenerative disease. When they become unable to control the muscles needed for swallowing, these patients receive a tube through which they inject nutritious solutions into their stomachs. Pols and Limburg brought out the strategies that patients developed to eat and enjoy their food despite having to use the tube.

The case of the grandmother and her dentures thus relates to a third body of literature on appreciation and enjoyment of food in health care practices, the challenge that taking up food poses to impaired bodies, and the care that is provided to them by professionals. In observing such situations, ethnographers make visible practices of care, analysing ideals and norms in medicine, and theorising care more broadly. In contrast to the cases conveyed by Mol and Pols
and Limburg, the situation I described above did not happen in a rehabilitation centre, but in a restaurant where a daughter provided care for her mother without monetary renumeration.24

While it is possible to analyse how the processing of food items happened as the uncle and I had the fish main course, and as Matthias and I took bites of the chocolate cake, I would argue that it was only in the situation described above that processing itself became an issue. Only the grand-mother and her daughter articulated that what made a dish *schmeckt gut* was related to the struggle to chew it successfully.25 The two never raised issues such as whether or not the flavours of the main course had been exciting or to what extent the dish had been cooked with passion and love. Again, I would argue that the situation shows how “tasting” can be ordered and organised in a third and yet again different way that consists mainly of a *processing*.

The observation that moments in which something *schmeckt gut* can occur as the outcome of different modes of ordering and organising sensual relations and engagements with food, “tasting”, opens up a new question. Rather than asking how tastes are accounted for and disputed, the question becomes how such modes of “tasting” relate to each other. During the family celebration in the *Gasthaus Nibelungenhof*, three different modes co-existed because of two ways that they were distributed. First, the cake that had been prepared by a family member (the aunt) solicited an engagement with her. She was present in the same room, while the courses that had been served beforehand and af-

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24 For an analysis of “care” as an alternative to “choice” in the organisation of health care practices, see Mol (2006); and on “care” outside health care practices, see Mol, Moser & Pols (2010).

25 A beautiful analysis that in a similar way de-universalises “experience” in the sense of “being in the world”, through the notion of “struggling” has been undertaken by Robert Desjarlais. In the paper “Struggling along” (1994), Desjarlais describes how through his fieldwork in a shelter for homeless mentally ill people in Boston he came to question the Western philosophical category of “experience”, which, according to the author, is characterised by a narrative flow, interiority, reflexivity and coherence. Desjarlais’ informants described their way of living as a “struggling along.” Desjarlais characterises “struggling along” as a second way of “being in the world” constituted by a holding oneself together and making do with the day-to-day contingencies in the here and now.
terwards by a professional chef (and been paid for) did not. It was, in this case, the food object (a present, hand made, not bought) that interpellated the people eating it to order their sensual engagements as socialising. Secondly, the grandmother did not to engage in the same way with the fish main course as the uncle or Matthias had. Neither of the two was confronted with difficulties or impairments while eating. It was, in this case, the body of the person who was eating which turned sensual engagements with food into a process of processing. Different modes of ordering “tasting” were distributed over different food object and bodies. A “tasting together in difference” took place.

**Inclusions into a “tasting together in difference”**

This paper has provided an investigation into moments in which German speakers state that something *schmeckt gut*. It has focused on such moments that happen during eating out in a restaurant and catered events. Based on ethnographic observations of one event, a family celebration that took place in the *Gasthaus Nibelungenhof* in Austria, the paper has analysed three such moments. The analysis has teased apart the entities to which that a dish *schmeckt gut* became related — a painting on the wall, the effort that went into making a cake, the ease with which a dish was chewed — and traced the activities that lead into these moments — discarding cloves of garlic, getting up and expressing praise, ordering a dish for another person based on physical chewing needs. Taking the German expression, that something “tastes good”, literally, I have theorised these moments as three different modes of ordering and organising “tasting”: experiencing, socialising and processing food. I have provided an alternative picture of what can count as “tasting” compared to what English or French provide (Manzo, 2010; Hennion, 2004). I have argued that while it is possible when studying tasting to bring together different approaches and investigate how, as one takes a bite, a person multi-sensorially experiences the qualities of food items and socialises with others around her, but in any moment in which
something schmeckt gut, not all of these aspects are equally relevant. In the family celebration, different family members employed different modes of ordering and organising “tasting”.

Two questions follow from this. First, the three moments in which something schmeckt gut that I have analysed illuminated three specific ways of ordering and organising tasting, namely as experiencing, socialising and processing. If people engage in micro-practices that organise and order “tasting” in different ways, how else might people order “tasting” through other activities they engage in before, during, and after eating out? In the moment in which something schmeckt gut presented in the introduction, for instance, something yet again different seems to be going on. In this case, that the soup schmeckt gut became tied up with hunger that became satiated. Secondly, to what extent do people combine or switch between different modes of ordering? In the three situations that I analysed, that something schmeckt gut was not the outcome of an addition of delicious flavours and the passion with which a dish had been prepared. Yet, such an addition within one situation might happen during other eating events elsewhere and deserves further investigation. My own involvement in two different situations in which something schmeckt gut exemplifies also that it is possible for one person to switch between different orderings of “tasting”. The question of who is good at switching and how people manage it equally deserve further inquiry.

Hsu’s claim of “a ‘mutuality’ between social relations and the material world” (2008: 433f.) exemplifies where the challenge for ethnographic research into people’s sensual engagements with food lay a decade ago: in combining attention to “social relations” and “the material world” which had not been evident earlier. Working along these lines, I have brought out how moments in which something schmeckt gut can be the outcome of a process of socialising as well as of experiencing qualities inherent in food. By following the concerns of my informants, I think we can learn what the next task might be for our ethnographic investigations into tasting. In the event that this paper has reported about, not everybody — not every body —, it turned out, was equally
well-equipped for eating and sensually engaging with food. For a grandmother wearing dentures chewing the food served to her during the celebration had been a challenge. What was at stake was therefore not only people socialising through food with each other and experiencing qualities inherent in food, but a body that had been in need of care provided to it by others. A person who might have been excluded if care had not been provided had become included in the event. At stake, in other words, was a body living on with, more or less, quality of life, for a little longer still. This is not meant metaphorically. Matthias’ grandmother and the person whose dentures I was allowed to photograph (Image 8) have passed away since I finished my fieldwork. The next challenge, as we ethnographically investigate people’s sensual engagements with food in the future, might be exactly this – to articulate and theorise how such inclusions are made in a “tasting together in difference”.

References


