Tasting in mundane practices: Ethnographic interventions in social science theory
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Abstract:
What influences how people taste the food they eat? This paper investigates how sensual engagements with food, and in particular the tasting of it, become contextualised in everyday life practices and social science theories. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Swiss hospital, the Kantonsspital Graubünden, this paper analyses what doctors, patients and nurses bring up as shaping sensual engagements with food. It also investigates how sensual engagements with food become contextualised in three social scientific studies on “taste”, “eating” and “tasting”: Distinction (Bourdieu, 2010), Daily and Festival Food (Wiegelmann, 1967), From the Glass to the Lips (Teil, 2004). The paper argues that three different contexts have been developed in the previous studies: “society”, “food culture” and “in practice”. These three contexts do not help make sense of what was observed and brought up by the people working and living in the hospital as shaping sensual engagements with food: what happens before, after, and around eating. The paper therefore adds “mundane goings-on” as a fourth context. It concludes that contextualising tasting allows the addressing of social issues and recommends further investigation of the relations between contexts.
What matters for tasting?

What influences how people taste the food they eat? Consider this situation that I observed during ethnographical fieldwork.

Field notes, 26th August 2011, noon

Light is streaming through the huge window front onto the beige cotton cloth that covers the table. Martina puts a grey plastic tray on the table. On the tray sits a small bowl with lettuce and cucumber salad. Next to it there is a plate filled with steamed carrots and a portion of grated fried potatoes. Martina settles herself in a chair. On the opposite side of the table, next to me, Regula has already taken a seat. She sits in front of a plate filled with chicken nuggets and a heap of noodles with vegetables. Martina takes up the cutlery and fills the fork with potatoes. She brings the fork to her mouth, takes the bite, chews and swallows. She reaches over the table, grabs the salt-shaker that is standing there, adds some salt to the potatoes, and stirs them. At the same time Regula takes up her cutlery, cuts through the first nugget and puts it into her mouth. I start eating as well.

Was the way Martina, Regula and I perceived and appreciated flavours, textures and other qualities of the dishes in front of us on the table influenced by the colour of the tablecloth and the light streaming through the window? Did it matter that Martina and Regula were female, around 35 years old, had been trained as nurses and were working as such? Was it important that the situation took place in Chur, a town of around 30,000 inhabitants in the Graubünden canton in the East of Switzerland in the west of Europe? Was it relevant that the room in which all this happened was the canteen of a hospital, the Kantonsspital Graubünden, which, in 2011, provided health care for 16,862 patients with public, semi-private and private insurance and employed 1,438 doctors, nurses and
other professionals? Did the 8,809 thorax radiographies that were performed in the hospital that year, the 9 feet that were amputated, and the 932 babies that were delivered, make maybe even a difference?²⁶

People’s sensual relations to food seem to be affected, or potentially be affected by everything. But if everything can matter, what are “the differences that make a difference”?²⁷ What engenders hierarchies and inequalities? What creates “goods” and “bads”?²⁸ What, in other words, is the context that matters for tasting?

Remaining in the quasi-naive position of the student, in this paper I will investigate how sensual engagements with food, moments in which something, as is said in German, “tastes good” for instance, become contextualised in everyday life practices and social science theories. As a starting point I will use the present continuous form of the verb “to taste”, “tasting”.

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the line of Emerson et al. (2011) and Amann and Hirschauer (1997). It took place between 2009 and 2013 in several Western European countries where I gathered observational material in different situations and sites, amongst others, hospitals. During my fieldwork in the Kantonsspital Graubünden, I observed the preparation of food in the hospital’s kitchen, the delivery of meals to the wards, and sales at the hospital’s canteen and take-away units. I had breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and coffees in between with doctors, patients and nurses.²⁹ I complemented this observational material with semi-structured interviews with the heads of two wards, the health care staff unit and the kitchens. Here I present field notes based on the observations and interviews and analyse what doctors, patients and nurses articulate as mattering for tasting, which I will theorise as “context”.

²⁷ The expression of “difference that makes a difference” is borrowed from Nassehi (2003). While this paper does not take Nassehi’s system theory approach, it shares the assumption that differences (and reality) are not given, but performed.
²⁸ For the notions of “goods” and “bads”, see Mol (2013).
²⁹ All people have been anonymised and the medical case described in section 3 slightly simplified. The names are invented.
At the same time, I will investigate social science studies on what the authors call “taste”, “eating”, and “tasting” that are based on empirical data gathered in Western societies. I will focus on three studies, Distinction (Bourdieu, 2010), Daily and Festival Food (Wiegelmann, 1967), and From the Glass to the Lips (Teil, 2004). Reasons for this choice will become clear in the sections that follow this. I will analyse the representation, description and/or explanation on what matters for tasting (or the “context”) that is provided in these publications which are the outcome of the socio-material research practices and processes (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Law, 2004) the authors had been involved in.

My main argument is that while the three studies develop three different contexts, “society”, “food culture” and “in practice”, these do not help to make sense of what doctors, patients and nurses articulate as influencing sensual engagements with food: what happens before, after, and around eating. I will therefore add “mundane goings-on” as a fourth context, concluding that each context allows for addressing a specific social issue. Finally, I will recommend further investigation of the relation between contexts.

“Society” and time

Field notes, 13th September 2011, paediatric ward, lunch, part 1

Corina Rohner and I take a seat on the bench that has been put up on the balcony. The sky is blue, the sun is shining and the mountains provide a panorama that is fit for a postcard. Mrs Rohner, a doctor on duty on this day on the ward for paediatric medicine, cuts through the potato gratin on her plate. She pushes the piece of the gratin onto her fork, puts it into her mouth, chews and swallows. “Mmmm, s’Gratin schmeckt guat! [The gratin tastes good.]” She cuts a piece from the slice of veal, pierces it on the fork, puts it into her mouth, chews and swallows. She lays down the cutlery.
“If you study taste, then you have to read Bourdieu!” a colleague from a sociology department advised me when I returned from fieldwork. “His book *Distinction* is the most important social scientific study in this regard ever.” So I started reading Bourdieu.

*Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* was first published in 1979, in French, with the title *Distinction. Critique Social du Jugement*. It is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected between 1963 and 1967, in Paris, Lyon and a small village in the countryside in France by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu went to many households and asked the people living in them, a total of 1,217, many questions, including what kind of food they ate and how they ate it. He used the data to create up the following:

![Coordinate system printed on page 182 of Distinction (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]): The food space](image)
This coordinate system shows that pork, pasta, potatoes and beans, “cheap” food, was eaten by those interviewees who had little income, or “economic capital” as Bourdieu called this. In contrast, beef, veal and lamb, fruit and vegetables were consumed by people with high income. Bourdieu argued that what food is eaten by whom is not, as economic theory posits, an effect of economic capital merely. Formal and informal education, which he called “cultural capital”, also needs to be taken into account. This becomes clear through the food items eaten by those survey participants who had a medium amount of capital, but different compositions thereof. Those with a lot of formal and informal education and a relatively small salary consumed bread and dairy products while those with high income and less formal and informal education ate, in contrast, pastries and game (note that the graphic above does not provide any insights into the differences that might have been found between Paris, Lyon and the small village in the countryside).

Based on this graphic, Bourdieu further argued that three patterns of a “propensity and capacity to appropriate” (2010: 169) food objects — he calls this “taste” [“goût”] — could be distinguished: a “taste of necessity” (for fat, fattening, the most nourishing food), a “taste of freedom” (for food that is fresh, lean and light) and a “modest taste” (for food that is either healthy and naturally sweet or rich and intense). Through taste, people, whom Bourdieu calls “social actors”, perceive others and judge them. They relate to those with a similar taste and distinguish themselves from others with different tastes through their taste, and thus form social classes. Taste, so Bourdieu went on to argue, is the outcome of the social conditions social actors found themselves in when growing up. According to him, by learning to like and consume types of objects other than during childhood, social actors can become part of a new, higher, social class, or at least try to become part of that higher class. The idea of taste is itself, he argued, bourgeois because it presupposes a freedom of choice.
Taste, Bourdieu concluded, is a mechanism of social distinction, a driver in the struggle for the distribution of power between social classes within society.\(^{30}\) It (re-)creates domination by elites who manage to define their taste as the only “legitimate” one and institutionalise it in the educational system. But let’s go back to that lunch. What happens next?

*Field notes, 13th September 2011, paediatric ward, lunch, part 2*

Mrs Rohner takes another bite of the potato gratin. She puts down her cutlery and then chews and swallows. “Today is a good day,” she observes. “There is even time to put down the cutlery.” Her remark reminds me of the day before. On that day, in the morning Mrs Rohner had been assigned to treat a patient with a chronic blood deformation disease. Her task was to fit him with a catheter. Inserting the thin tube into the patient’s vessel did not go as smoothly as expected. It got stuck. She had to begin again. And again. And again. By the time the thin tube had been finally fitted into the blood vessel and the infusion turned on, it was 12.45 pm. Mrs Rohner ran down the stairs, with me following her, to the canteen. Once there, she picked up a tray, walked to the counter with the main dishes, took a pizza with roasted vegetables, paid, filled two glasses with water, ran up the stairs again and took a seat at the table on the balcony. At that point it was 12.52 pm. Mrs Rohner started eating immediately. Within no time, the entire pizza was gone. Then she took the first glass of water, drank it in one draft, put it down, took the second glass and drank it, too. As she put it down she said, “And now I feel sick!” She got up again immediately. In order to follow her, I had to leave half of my pizza untouched. She returned the tray to the nurses’ kitchen, hurried down the stairs, along a corridor and into the radiographer’s room: a dark chamber in which two projectors threw black and white pictures of deformed brain structures onto the walls. It was 12.59 pm when she arrived. She was in time. The radiography meeting started at one o’clock.

\(^{30}\) For a study exploring how in Israel during weddings the new middle class distinguishes itself through a “simple taste”, see Kaplan (2013).
I could now start analysing Mrs Rohner having her lunch in the vein of Bourdieu’s theory. I could investigate how, through the consumption of a potato gratin and veal, the doctor distinguishes herself from others and from whom exactly; and, for instance, include as a further dimension through which distinction operates in a social actor from an upward striving middle class the hurry that the doctor displays and in which the dish is eaten. Mrs Rohner would then become an actor struggling over power however. This is not the impression that I got during fieldwork. The paediatricians whom I came to follow around seemed instead to be struggling to provide health care to the patients on their ward in the best way possible and to fit in meals in between. After the lunch described in the second part of the field notes in the evening at 8.30 pm, Mrs Rohner, who was walking to her office to finish paperwork as I was about to leave the ward, said almost apologetically: “I always try to make time for lunch, not wolf it down like I did today... But at the moment there is so much work...”

I would argue that first, if one takes a step back, one recognises that sensual engagements with food are situated in a very particular way in Bourdieu’s *Distinction*. Moments in which something “tastes good” are implicitly subsumed under a propensity and capacity to appropriate food, a preference and consumption pattern, a “taste” of a group of people and a mechanism of social distinction between more and less powerful groups. Tasting thus becomes contextualised *socially*, within *social classes* that make up “[society]”. Contextualising tasting socially allows Pierre Bourdieu to question whether taste is an individual’s free choice and to argue that that is rhetorical itself, contributing to domination and the maintenance of power distribution within society. By linking the appreciation of food items not only to income, economic capital, but also to the transmission of education through the parental home and formal school education, cultural capital, he can thus point out the responsibility of the educational system in the reproduction of elites and the recreation of inequalities.
Secondly, what the doctor says, “There is even time to put down the cutlery”, should be attended to. What the paediatrician brings up as what mattered for her to sensually engage with and appreciate that what she was eating “tasted good”, as she put it, were not other people and what they consumed, but the tasks and activities that she was involved in before, after and around eating. What tasting becomes related to, and becomes articulated as making the difference that makes a difference, are mundane goings-on around eating which I suggest to be another and different context that matters for tasting.

In the situation described above and on the day before mentioned in the field notes, they left more or less time for sensual engagements with food. These two lunches were not the only situations that I observed in which time was an issue. The doctors had long working hours and on many days left the ward long after the shops in town had closed. One of the doctors told me that when he got home he usually ate a dinner of some crackers, cheese, and fresh crunchy red bell peppers that he bought in a shop at the train station, a shop that sells a choice of fruit and vegetables and does not close until midnight. This shop had only recently opened and this, as the doctor put it, had improved his “quality of life significantly”. He explained that this was because he had been doing a lot of his shopping at a petrol station which also stays open until late at night, but sells neither fruit nor vegetables. On another day, I saw one of the senior doctors rushing down the corridor with a sandwich in his hand. While walking he took a bite of the sandwich, looked at it, then took another bite. “How is it?”

The lack of sufficient time for eating and drinking is a common problem and common knowledge on this and other wards. In the British Journal for Medicine the “Christmas special” article in 2010 reports a study on dehydration in junior doctors and patients being treated for dehydration by these doctors (Solomon et al., 2010). As it turned out, the doctors who participated in the study were more likely to be “at risk” of dehydration than the patients whose dehydration they were treating.
I asked him. “Not bad,” he replied. Later he told me that he had not had a warm lunch for five days in a row. There were premature triplets in the intensive care unit of the ward. Their body weight of less than 1000 grams and their multiple afflictions — immature lungs, pneumonia, and bleedings in the brain, called intercranial haemorrhage — had, as he put it, “kept me busy”. There had simply been no time left to go to the canteen, stand in queue to pay and sit down for a warm lunch during the midday hours. And when doctors were on night duty there was always the possibility in the background that an emergency might arise at exactly the moment in time when they had settled themselves at the dinner table and were about to start eating the plate of food they had prepared that evening.

“Food culture” and emotional quality

Field notes, 25th August 2011, internal medicine ward, morning

With a light knock the nurse opens the door to the next room. In the room, there are three patients in their beds. One of them is Lucinda Schnyder. The nurse pushes a cart with a computer on it towards Mrs Schnyder’s bed. A program for taking down the menu orders flickers on the screen. The nurse announces cheerfully, “I am here to take your orders for the next three meals.” “Something positive at least!” Mrs Schnyder sighs. “Mrs Schnyder, for dinner this evening… Did you have a look at the menu?” The nurse summarises the choices in a few words, “There are boiled potatoes with a cheese platter [Gschwellti mit Käseplatte]. Or stuffed tomatoes with risotto [gefüllte Tomaten mit Risotto]. And of course, you always have the standard menu with, for instance, a platter of regional dried meat and whole wheat bread [Bündnerteller with Vollkornbrötli] and muesli [Birchermüesli].” Mrs Schnyder interrupts the enumeration. She has already decided. “I’ll take the risotto.” The nurse nods, “Half a portion, as usual?” “Yes,” Miss Schnyder confirms and adds with insistence, “but a whole portion of the rhubarb compote dessert!”
“Your fieldwork happened in a German speaking area, right?” a colleague from a folklore studies department asked me when I told him about my research. “Well, then you should definitely read Günter Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Food*. Wiegelmann is the founding father of research into popular food culture in German speaking areas like yours. German folklore studies with studies on “the Germanic” way of eating, you should know, contributed to the rise of the National Socialist regime. It was with this study that Wiegelmann showed how to study popular food culture more scientifically after WWII. And since he combined different methods, which was very innovative at that time, his book was also read in other parts of Europe, the US, and even Japan (Wiegelmann, 2006: 304-311).” I started reading the recommended book.

*Daily and Festival Food. Change and Present Situation* was published in 1967 in German under the title *Alltags- und Festspeisen. Wandel und gegenwärtige Stellung*. The book is based on archival work undertaken by Wiegelmann. He collected data produced between 1909 and 1939 through large surveys. Questionnaires had been sent out all over Germany, Moravia, Bohemia and Austria, and other German speaking areas of Western Europe, questionnaires in which people had been asked what kind of food they ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner; what kind of food they ate on normal days and on different festival days throughout the year; and how they prepared it. Based on the data gathered and stored in the archives Wiegelmann consulted, he drew up the following:

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32 Other sciences such as agricultural sciences, for instance, have been working on increasing productivity, breeding new plants and improving existing species. By doing so they facilitated the creation and use of “food as weapon” (Gerhard, 2011).
This map shows the food preparation techniques used at the beginning of the 20th century for potatoes served as side dishes for wedding meals. The dots in the left upper corner indicate that in Hanover (the lower of the two H.), in Oldenburg and its surroundings, potatoes were boiled, salted, and eaten as *Salzkartoffeln*. Further down to the right, the triangles in the middle of the map indicate that between Leipzig, abbreviated with an L., and Nuremberg, the N., potatoes...
had been turned into dumplings, *Kartoffelklöße* und *Kartoffelknödel*. The dashes even further down indicate that between Nuremberg (N.), Munich (M.) and further to the East and South, in Austria, potatoes had been turned into a salad, consumed as *Kartoffelsalat*. (Note that the map shown above does not provide any information about differences between richer and poorer people that might have been found.) This map is one of many on “ways of preparing”, “hierarchy between meals”, “succession of dishes” and “ways of eating” [“Zubereitungssarten”, “Mahlzeitenordnung”, “Speisenfolgen”, and “Verzehrarten”] in different German speaking regions in Middle Europe. And it is one of many that all show that in the North-West of Germany, food was not prepared in the same way, meals were not held in the same form, and the dishes were not the same as those eaten in the Middle East and the South-East of Germany and Austria. This led Wiegelmann to argue that rather than there being one Germanic way of preparing food, holding meals, and eating food, as had been the National Socialist’s claim about Germany, different food cultures exist in different German speaking regions of Western Europe. Let us now return to Mrs Schnyder.

*Field notes, 25th August 2011, internal medicine ward, afternoon, part 1*

In the afternoon I return to Mrs Schnyder’s room. She is reading a book as I enter and ask if she would mind telling me more about the food. She seems to be happy that somebody has shown up at her bedside and starts enthusiastically, “The food here is really good. As good as in a 5 star hotel! Actually,” she goes on, “I am supposed to be on a five star luxury liner right now, you know. I had planned to go on a holiday to the Netherlands with my best friend.” She lifts herself up, bends down, fetches her handbag and takes out a travel brochure with a long white boat on the front page. “Look, the program for each day. The first day, that was yesterday, started in Amsterdam with a tour of the canals, the Van Gogh museum and the … how do you pronounce this… Rijksmuseum. Gouda is on the program for today,” she explains and starts reading out loud, “A visit to the cheese market and the local cheese museum. Der Ausflug endet mit einer schmackhafte Käseverkostung! [The tour ends with a tasty cheese tasting!]”
A “tasting” [“Verkostung”] was advertised explicitly as such to attract customers to the holiday trip described in the situation above. It was organised by a tourist agency to entertain them on a journey through a foreign away country such as, in this case, the Netherlands. In the brochure detailing the schedule for the trip, the “tasty tasting” was one activity besides “visiting a museum” and “a boat trip through the canals of Amsterdam”. “Tasting”, in travelling and the marketing rhetoric around it, was offered as a possibility to make contact with and discover an “exciting” and excitingly “different” food culture which is part of “the culture” of a foreign country that is worth visiting. A study published in a paper entitled “Eat the World” (2002) written by the two folklore studies scholars Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli shows something similar happening in practices of advertising for and eating food in restaurants in Quebec city. The patrons of the ethnic restaurants in rich and poorer neighbourhoods that the researchers studied attracted customers by advertising their cuisine explicitly as “exotic”. The diners who frequented these places, in turn, described dining out as a metaphoric “trip”, a travel to a “foreign country” while actually staying “at home”. They made sense of the appreciation of “foreign” flavours and the consumption of “exotic” dishes as a way of getting in touch with another “culture”.

Turgeon and Pastinelli’s study is just one among many others more recent studies in which, compared to Wiegelmann’s study of different food preparation techniques and ways of eating in German speaking areas of Western Europe, “culture” and “place” are less taken for granted. They investigate instead how “culture” and “place” are made by contemporarily studying questions such as: How do sensual relations to food create “place” and “place” these sensual relations? How does tasting become a way of relating to a “different culture”? And what are the ambivalent dynamics involved in this process, for instance, how can eating be a way of at the same time appreciating the food of “the Other” while disliking the fact “these other people” live in the same country? So, returning to the hospital, how does Mrs Schnyder’s story end?

34 For what counts as “foreign” food and the xenophobia operating through food in Switzer-
“I was really looking forward to the trip! But then, everything came different.” Mrs Schnyder sighs. “What happened?” I ask. “A little more than two weeks ago I went to my upstairs neighbour’s apartment. They had gone on holiday and I had promised I would water their plants and feed their cat while they were away. On that day I prepared the cat’s food as usual. But, as I put it on the floor, the cat jumped at me and bit into my leg!” Mrs Schnyder lifts the duvet and pulls up the leg of her pyjamas. In the middle of her shin, the skin is red and a scab covers the hole left by the cat’s teeth. “I went to see my GP who, because there was a chance of blood poisoning, hospitalised me. And now I am here and not in Gouda.” She sighs. There is nothing more to add. “Do you know if the doctors are already on their way on the daily round? They should be here by now…” I shake my head. She sighs again. “My family tells me that they don’t have time to visit, and the lady over there,” she lowers her voice and points to the bed at the other side of the room, “She talks and talks and talks… Well, at least the food is good. Especially the desserts. Die schmeckan m’r immer am beschta! [They always taste best to me!]

Following Wiegelmann, I could now start analysing the dishes on the menu in the hospital in Chur; and explore how, through engaging with these dishes, a sense of “place” is created in the line of more recent research on “taste” and “place”. I hesitate, however, because Mrs Schnyder did not talk in the same way about having a dessert in the hospital and trying samples of cheese on a holiday trip. “Tasting” in talking about the holiday trip and in the advertisements by the travel agency became explicitly presented as an activity of discovering another food culture and would have been enacted as such on the trip. But this was not how having desserts while being a patient in a hospital became presented by Mrs Schnyder. She never raised Chur, the place, in which these sensual engagements with food happened, as an issue. She just related that it “tasted good”.

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land, see Bendix (1993); for how the European Union’s Quality Label Program imbues food objects with geographical “origin”, see Welz (2013); and for a reflection on the Western “us” and its Oriental “others” in the course of an ethnographic experiment on eating with fingers, see Mann et al. (2011).
I therefore argue that Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes*, and studies investigating how “taste” and “place” are made, have situated sensual engagements with food very specifically. Rather than constituting social classes possessing more or less capital, in Wiegelmann’s study tasting becomes part of, and thus conceptualised as, a way of preparing dishes, holding meals, and eating food that is specific to towns, regions, and countries. Tasting becomes situated geographically, within “food culture”. Turgeon and Pastinelli’s paper, an example of a study on “taste” and “place”-making, also does so. This makes sense because the people interviewed, restaurant owners and customers, did so too. Contextualising tasting geographically allows scholars to articulate differences between and diversity of food cultures, and provides a means of highlighting processes of hybridisation as well as those of Othering and racism. It enables Wiegelmann, for example, to show that the National Socialist regime’s claim of one real Germanic way of eating based on the same survey data that he had used had been part of a racist ideology, propaganda and political practice instead of a careful scientific interpretation of data.

In the case described above, as in the case of the doctors, sensual engagements with food become related, however, to what happens before, around and after eating.

Appreciating an entire portion of a rhubarb dessert was juxtaposed by Mrs Schnyder with, for instance, waiting for the doctors to show up on their daily round, not being visited by her family, and avoiding a chat with the woman she shared the room with. Consequently, I would argue that the context that matters for tasting is again the mundane goings-on. While the doctors’ accounts raised the issue of time, the patient highlighted how mundane goings-on shape the *emotional quality* of sensual engagements with food.
When lying in a bed on the ward of a hospital and having to deal with being afflicted, sensually engaging with food, to take up and expand on Mrs Schnyder’s words, is “something positive at least”. Others also explained how the emotional quality of sensual engagements with food was shaped by what happens around it. When the nurse and I had left the bedside of another patient who, after having thoroughly studied the menu, had neatly written his choices for dinner, breakfast and lunch for the following day on a notepad, the nurse pointed out that patients liked to engage with food. “It gives them something to do.” A doctor, with whom I shared these observations, added that appreciating dishes the patients had ordered themselves might be enjoyable for them as it was an activity over which they had control. Unlike medication prescribed to them by the doctors and sickness and disease happening to them, they were able to choose what to eat.

“Practice” and materialities

Field notes, 30th August 2011, internal medicine ward, dinner, part 1

In a small room for the nursing staff, the table is set for dinner. Patricia Candrian, one of the nurses working on the ward on this evening, takes a seat at the table in front of a plate covered with a lid. The two other nurses on duty with her join us. Mrs Candrian lifts the lid. As she sees the size of the piece of tomato quiche the lid had covered, doubts arise, “Such a big piece…” One of her colleagues reassures her, “Don’t worry. You’ll finish it. If not now, then later during the shift.” The second colleague, while unpacking her dinner, starts talking about the food in the hospital, “We are really lucky. The kitchen is good here. It’s always fresh.” Meanwhile, Mrs Candrian has taken a first bite. “Mmmm… Lighter than I had expected. S’schmeckt echt guat. [It tastes really good.]” The second colleague adds, “Yes, the food is really good here, especially the spaghetti bolognese. When I am on night shift I often choose the spaghetti for dinner.”
“If you are studying tasting, then Geneviève Teil’s work might be useful,” a colleague from a STS research center told me. “It provides the most detailed analysis of tasting among STS studies on food and taste we discuss in STS (Hennion, 2004; Paxson, 2014; Serres, 2008). And, it’s really cool!” So, I looked at Geneviève Teil’s work.

Her book, From the Glass to the Lips, original French title De la coupe aux lèvres, was published in 2004. It is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork that she carried out during the 1990s. The ethnographer observed wine producers, wine critics and wine lovers in both France and Spain, followed educational wine tasting courses and a food odour training. Teil gathered a lot of material out of which she presented the following figure in an article entitled “The production of the aesthetic judgement of wine by the vinicultural critic” [“La production du jugement esthétique sur les vins par la critique vinicole”] (2001):

![Object pictured on page 78 in La production du jugement esthétique sur les vins par la critique vinicole (Teil, 2001): Tasting sheet](image.png)
This table is a “tasting sheet” [“fiche de dégustation”]. This is composed of seven rows and six columns. The rows are the categories “eye: general aspect”, “nose: intensity and quality”, “mouth: intensity and quality”, “overall harmony” and “overall”; while the columns range from “excellent” to “very good”, “good”, “insufficient”, “to eliminate”, and “observation of the taster”. Printed on paper, the table was used in what Teil called “competitions with a standardised tasting protocol” [“concours avec un protocol de dégustation standardisé”]. These were competitions where a group of wine experts formed a jury who, as she put it, “tasted/tried/sampled” [“dégustait”] a selection of wines arranged in a competitive order. The jury, Teil explained, blind tasted the wines, which meant knowing neither the type of vine nor the producer or any other information. After taking a sample of each wine, the jury members ticked the boxes on the sheet and filled it out. The individual assessments were subsequently combined to form a collective judgment. Teil does not specify the socio-economic background of the jury members, nor does she mention the geographical location, the city or town in which she observed the use of the wine tasting sheet. Instead she stresses instead that the tasting sheet was only one object besides wine glasses and many other paraphernalia that were used and manipulated by experts, and that standardised competitive tasting sessions were one setting in which experts tasted wine in addition to tasting it in the vineyard, in a cave, in a lounge with dimmed light and leather sofas, or during what experts called, a “optimal meal”, which meant a meal of several courses in a grand restaurant. The perceptions of and judgements about wine made in all these conditions were compared with each other by the wine critic. Based on the tasting sheet and the ethnographic observations, Teil argued that perception, rather than being a physiological mechanism in the human body about which the natural sciences discover the truth, is the outcome of a “procedure [that is] complex, collective, [and] multiform” (2001: 83).³⁵ Let’s go back to the dinner. How does it end?

³⁵ For a more extensive discussion on tasting and how it brings together different sensory impressions, including memories, see Korsmeyer & Sutton (2011).
Mrs Candrian takes another bite from the tomato quiche while the conversation shifts away from food to the patients lying on the ward on that day and the orders concerning their treatment given by the doctors. The plates become emptier and the meal ends. Mrs Candrian gets up and so do the others. Walking down the corridor towards the nurse’s office, she tells me about another meal, “A couple of weeks ago, I can still remember the lunch on that day….” Mrs Candrian’s colleagues and I are listening. “On that day we had had a patient who was supposed to be discharged very soon. Parts of the therapy, however, still hadn’t been attuned. And this stressed the patient a lot. At noon, I brought her lunch. I put the tray in front of her. And all of a sudden, because of all the stress, she threw up. She threw up vomit full of dark, clotted, old blood, threw up all over the plate, the tray, the bed sheet, the bed.” The two nurses who, so far have followed the story in silence, interject now, “Eurgh.” “Yucky! Stop, stop telling us this gross stuff…” Mrs Candrian ends the story quickly for me, “It was bad. Really bad. I can tell you! I cleaned up the vomit – someone had to do it after all – but afterwards, when my lunch break started, I didn’t have much of an appetite.”

I could now start comparing Mrs Candrian’s way of sensually engaging with the piece of tomato quiche with wine experts’ practices of perceiving and judging wine and would then see that Mrs Candrian did not differentiate between the sensory impression the first bite left in “the nose” and in “the mouth”, two distinct categories on the tasting sheet used by experts; and that her aesthetic appreciation — “Really good.” — remained rather vague. By doing so I would transform Mrs Candria into a possibly trained wine critic. However, she did not give me the impression that she wanted to be or become a trained one; she never began comparing the perception she had of the piece of tomato quiche while sitting in the staff room on that evening with the same dish in other settings on other days.

Consequently I argue that Teil’s study also situates sensual engagements with food and drinks in a specific way. The use of a tasting sheet is described as part of a socio-material process through which perception is organised and
acted upon by wine experts. It is one way of organising perception that is compared to and brought together with others by the experts, which, in Teil’s ethnography, together form “the practice of tasting wine in the field of wine experts”. Tasting becomes conceptualised as a profession’s way of producing knowledge. The context Teil’s ethnography situates tasting in is, to sum it up, “in practice”. Contextualising tasting “in practice” allows Teil to compare the wine expert’s way of socio-materially organising perception with the experimental conditions set up in natural science laboratories, examples of which have been analysed in the second chapter. Articulating the complex, multiform and collective procedures in which perception is organised by wine experts enables the social scientist to question the idea that perception is a physiological mechanism in the human body about which only natural sciences reveal the truth. She thus points out an alternative way of knowing taste unsettling the hegemony of natural science.

In contrast, like the doctors and the patient, what the nurse raises as what matters for sensual engagements with food are the activities before, after, and around eating. I would, thus, again argue that the context that matters for tasting in the hospital is the mundane goings-on. She pointed out that sensual impressions are altered materially by the mundane goings-on in addition to being shaped temporally and qualitatively/emotionally, as elaborated by doctors and patients.

At the lunch Mrs Candrian related appreciations and perceptions of food were changed by the odours and stenches, and by the textures and temperatures of the objects that she had manipulated during the goings-on she had been involved in before eating. Her sensual engagement with the lunch and consequent appreciation was affected by the sensory impressions that lingered from the objects that she had been exposed to before the meal. Vomit full of old clotted blood was not the only object raised as having an effect on perceptions and appreciations of foodstuff. Another that was mentioned — twice — by two doctors was human corpses. Over lunch, while having the meat-free option of the day, a young doctor still in her training shared this with me: “In the first year
of my medical training we dissected a corpse. I learned to see muscles, and in muscle tissue individual fibres. Now, I see muscle fibres also in a piece of steak…” During another lunch, an elderly and literally more hard-nosed doctor praised the steak he was having. There was a particular odour to not very fresh dead mammal’s flesh that he usually encountered on the pathology ward where the dead corpses were stored, he explained. But sometimes he also noticed this odour in a meat dish he had for lunch. In these cases, he deduced that the meat had been in the fridge for some time before being prepared by the chef in the kitchen. This particular steak, he pointed out, did not have that odour. It was, therefore, “very good”.

**Contexts as interventions**

What matters in how people taste the food they eat — the context of tasting — cannot be determined in advance. “Of course not!” was the reaction to this statement by another colleague from the social anthropology department. “This has been argued a long time ago already in anthropology, and more recently also in STS,” he told me.36 If, when I returned from fieldwork, I had started with

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36 The genealogy of the problem of “context” differs slightly between the two disciplines. In social anthropology, one of the earliest uses of “context” was in the 1920s to question evolutionist methods. Bronislaw Malinowski argued against James Fraser that rather than there being different levels of ‘civilization’ of people and their social institutions, social institutions are useful in the place, the context, they exist. In contrast, in STS, Actor-Network-Theory scholars started in the 1980s rejecting explanations of a situation that evoked anything that lied beyond it and by doing so reduce it to these factors outside. For an overview of the debate in social anthropology, see Dilley (2002). For an analysis of the discussion in STS, see Asdal & Moser (2012).
this fourth set of literature, I would not have had to read *Distinction*, *Daily and Festival Dishes*, and *From the Glass to the Lips* at all. But then I would not have discovered two crucial points either.

Through the “detour” described in the last three sections, I have learnt, first, precisely what the argument implies for sensual engagements with food, tasting in particular. I have shown how studies such as Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes* and Teil’s *From the glass to the lips*, through selections during the research process about what matters most for people’s sensual engagement with food, have assembled a context. As the researchers did not select the same entities, the contexts they constructed also are different. Bourdieu’s *Distinction* situates tasting within “society” constituted of social classes — it situates it socially. In contrast, Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes* localises tasting in a “food culture”, in countries, regions and towns — in other words, geographically. And differently again, *From the Glass to the Lips* puts tasting “in practice” by studying how perception is acted upon and organised by professionals. Three contexts have thus been developed so far in studies discussed in sociology, folklore studies, and STS: “society”, “food culture”, and “in practice”. None of these three contexts helped to make sense of what was raised as the context that matters for tasting in the everyday life practices that I ethnographically studied in a hospital, the *Kantonsspital Graubünden*. Based on observations of how doctors, patients and nurses ate meals, took note of qualities of dishes or appreciated them as a whole, and of what they articulated as making a difference for these sensual engagements with food, I have argued that another context that matters for tasting are “mundane goings-on” that happen before, around, and after eating. I have thus added a fourth context.37

37 In this paper, I have operationalised “context” as a representation, description and/or explanation provided in social scientific studies; and issues that are brought up by non-social scientists as mattering. For alternative ways of operationalising and analysing “contexts” that are crafted in science, see Law & Moser (2012); and people’s ways of contextualising, see Harvey (1999).
This raises the question of how contexts such as “society”, “food culture”, “practice”, and “mundane goings-on” relate to each other. Let me try to answer this tentatively, based on the literature discussed above, more precisely on how other studies deal with the context proposed in Bourdieu’s Distinction — contextualising within social classes with more or less capital of different kinds. First, it seems that contexts can be combined with each other. Turgeon and Pastineili’s paper “Eat the World” (2002) does this. While the paper describes how in Quebec restaurant owner advertise their food as being from a foreign country and their clients make sense of tasting exotic flavours as travelling to this place, the authors also specify briefly, in the vein of Bourdieu, the socio-economic background of the neighbourhood that the restaurants they studied were in. Second, contexts can also be played out against each other. In From the Glass to the Lips (2004), Geneviève Teil, rather than seeing socio-economic background as one of several factors influencing a wine critic’s judgment and perception of wine, argues that Bourdieu’s theory fails to account for the appreciation of a specific wine by a person. Third, as I have done in this paper, contexts can be experimented with. I have tried out Bourdieu’s way of contextualising, then analysed what it allows for, and in the end moved on. The relation between contexts of tasting is a question that deserves further investigation.

Contexts, as recent literature on the subject points out, do not only represent a reality out there. They are political. Contextualising tasting, secondly, is political in a very specific way, namely in the sense that it is an intervention. Each way of contextualising allows pointing out, raising and addressing of social issues. Situating tasting in “society” enabled Pierre Bourdieu to question the bourgeois idea of taste as free choice and point at the educational system’s responsibility in the (re-)creation of inequalities. Contextualising tasting

38 Much of the discussions around Bourdieu’s Distinction seems play out contexts against each other, arguing that the social mechanisms Bourdieu described in Distinction do or do not hold in other geographical places (Peterson, 2005).

39 In contrast, Vicky Singleton (2012) points out how politics can happen at the intersection of different contexts where alternative versions of reality become visible. Roy Dilley (2002) stresses another type of politics, namely the issue of power between the observing ethnographer and the observed people.
in a “food culture” allowed Günter Wiegelmann and other scholars working in his vein to articulate cultural diversity and to highlight processes of Othering and racism. Locating tasting “in practice” equipped Geneviève Teil to question dominant knowledge production practices in natural science laboratories and to point out alternative ways of knowing taste. Now, contextualising tasting in “mundane goings-on” allows the addressing of a further crucial issue, the question of the extent to which, and whether, the organisational settings that people are embedded in their everyday lives allow them to sensually relate to the food that they eat, notice its flavours, appreciate its qualities — or not.

If contexts are interventions, then the challenge is not so much to develop one context that exhaustively describes reality or create as many as contexts possible, but to craft contexts that are effective in intervening in the realities of tasting that we study and care about.

References


