Tasting in mundane practices: Ethnographic interventions in social science theory
Mann, A.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Abstract:

Steven Shapin (2012) has recently stressed the importance of investigating subjective ways of knowing, such as ‘tasting’. Responding to this call, the paper provides a study of ‘tasting’ as configured in three sets of practices. Based on Geneviève Teil’s ethnography of wine tasting, this paper argues that tasting is a way in which a subject gets to know an object is not a general truth, but a specific achievement realised in wine tasting. Mobilising ethnographic observations from eating out with friends to everyday life in a Benedictine convent, the paper proposes that in mundane eating, tasting is about stilling one’s hunger and in devoted living, it becomes yet another way to relate to God. What STS can learn from ‘tasting’, the paper concludes, is that people may become ‘knowing subjects’, take on different subject positions or renounce being ‘a subject’ altogether; and that knowing is just one of many ways of being and engaging in the world.
Studying subjective ways of knowing — investigating tasting

Most work in science and technology studies (STS) has been concerned with knowledge that declares itself to be objective. STS has amended this self-declaration, and revealed, in the words of Steven Shapin (2012a): “That [knowledge] which seems to be transparently about objects in the world contains ineradicable elements belonging to subjects” (171). The conclusion has been reached in various forms that objectivity is a false promise. But what about subjectivity? “You might think, (…) that subjectivity would be as much a topic of focused theoretical and empirical inquiry as its twin. We’d be greatly interested in what it is; we’d want to distinguish its specific forms and modes; we’d be interested in how it figures in concrete knowledge-making practices; and we’d be engaging with it in a naturalistic sort of way. But in science studies we’ve done almost none of those things” (172). To remedy this, Shapin argues, we would do well to explore inevitably subjective ways of knowing, like tasting, because as they taste food and drink subjects know subjectively.40 Taking on the task that he set for the field, Shapin started exploring the cultural history of wine tasting.41

When Shapin published his call for in-depth explorations of subjective knowing, I happened to be in the middle of an ethnographic exploration of practices of tasting, doing field work at a range of sites in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria and the UK. I was assisting caterers catering for Bar Mitzvahs, banquets and private dinner parties, shadowing doctors, nurses and patients in hospitals, eagerly making notes of lunch and dinner, observing photo shoots for cooking magazines and the cooking demonstrations of food archaeologists, participating in cheese making demonstrations and working in a cheese shop. And all along I was relentlessly studying my family and friends as we cooked and ate our meals, often meeting quite incredulous reactions. Was tasting really

40 Tasting has not always been ‘inevitably subjective’. In, for example, French chemistry it only came to be considered subjective in the 18th century, and was then replaced by tools deemed to allow for objective knowledge, see for this history Roberts (1995).
41 For this, see Shapin (2012b). Shapin is not the only one investigating tasting by looking at the practice of tasting wine, see also Serres (2008). More recently the tasting of other drinks, such as beer (Wright, 2014) and coffee (Manzo, 2010), has been similarly analysed.
serious enough for a full-fledged social science study? Consequently, I was glad that Shapin had endorsed my topic. It came as a welcome encouragement. But, as I carefully read and reread his text, I began to wonder. This article results from that wonder. No, I am not questioning whether subjectivity has not been explored in science and technology studies. Rather, I want to discuss something else. Since Shapin wants to learn about ‘subjective knowing’ he suggests we study ‘tasting’. Conversely though, should studies into ‘tasting’ expect it to be a matter of ‘subjective knowing’? In this article I will argue that this would be an impoverished way of understanding ‘tasting’.

To make my argument, I begin by presenting some of Geneviève Teil’s work. Since the early 90s, Teil has done what Shapin wants us to do: she has ethnographically studied wine tasting practices. Her work presents, in admirable detail, how wine tasting may be organised as, indeed, a matter of ‘subjective knowing’ and she lays out what all is required for this. After considering her work, as a contrast, I will present two cases from my own research where ‘tasting’ happens but where ‘subjective knowing’ is neither particularly relevant nor even happening. The first is the case of mundane eating, which I will present using field notes from a homely meal and a film-food-and-beer evening with friends. The second is the case of devoted living. For that, I will draw upon field notes derived from a stay in a Benedictine convent. In the case of mundane eating, I will show that tasting has little to do with knowing and more with stilling one’s hunger, with socialising and having a good time, flowing over and blending into these. In turn, in the case of devoted living, I will show that tasting dissolves into yet another way of being in a relation with God. It is not organised as a way to get to know one’s food, but rather as a way of appreciating life and praising God. My conclusion is that organising tasting as a way of knowing is quite an achievement, happening in wine tasting practices. Elsewhere, tasting becomes part of other ways of being in, and engaging with, the world.

See for instance the sexed subject, Hirschauer (1994); the embodied subject, Moser & Law (1999); the subject’s agency, Gomart & Hennion (1999); the subject eager to study aircraft, Law (2002); the subjects of choice and care, Mol (2008a); and patients’ subjective ways of knowing, Pols (2013).
Wine tasting: perceiving qualities

Since the early 1990s, Genevieve Teil has been studying wine producers, wine critics and wine lovers in France. She has written about the strategies of producers to make and sell wines with particular qualities (1997); courses where she learned from experts how to taste and smell (1998); guides that instruct wine lovers on how to enjoy wine (2009); and wine experts collectively sampling and comparing wines (2001). Like her informants, in her ethnography Teil pays attention to such minute details as the shape of wine glasses, the words that neophytes are taught, the ventilation in the rooms where smelling takes place and the body parts mobilised in the activity of tasting. To give some insight into how this works, I will present the highlights of her article *A la recherche du plaisir* (In search of pleasure) (2009), which is based on an analysis of wine guides written in Spanish, English and, mostly, French. These guides instruct their readers on how to enjoy wine. Teil divides them into two types: expert guides and wine-lover guides.

The expert’s guides address their reader as someone learning from an expert. For example, they provide meticulous instructions about the conditions under which wine sampling should take place. One of them states:

- “A normal physiological state. The taster has to be in good health.
- The time of degustation has to be set preferably between 10 am and 12 pm.
- As wines do not harmonise with food in the same way, it is imperative not to eat during degustation.
- It is forbidden to smoke in the premise of a degustation.
• *The tasted product has to be rejected. Wine contains alcohol, an euphorising product that carries the taster away into the domain of subjectivity.*” (Teil, 2009: 118)

So, there it is. In order to get to know a wine, a person may taste it carefully, but then must spit it out. Tasting wine carries an interesting ambiguity. The taster should get in contact with the tasted object, wine, but not too much. Swallowing would ‘carry the taster away into the domain of subjectivity’. Instead, she should stay sober and become acquainted with a host of terms that allow for the subtle differentiation of flavours that allow her to remark on, for instance, the *balsamic, mouldy,* and *geranium* characteristics of wine. Most guides provide only written instructions, but some equip the reader with odour samples. Teil even found one that had 54 of these. The wine knowledge that readers are assumed to acquire is not just factual. There are judgements to be made. The guides inform newcomers about characteristics that are more or less desirable in various types of wine. For instance, odours of oxidation are fine in more matured wines, but problematic in younger less matured ones.

The second type of guides addresses their readers as wine lovers and motivate them to follow their liking. Readers are encouraged to continue drinking the wines they have drunk so far, but to do so more attentively, registering differences between pleasures. As a second step they may then try out new wines. All along, newcomers are encouraged to compare the consequences of using different kinds of equipment, such as a mustard glass, a plastic cup and a wine glass; and to register what is different between situations, such as a work lunch, a family meal and a party. Wine lovers are taught that they should be curious. The guides recommend that they attend public wine tastings and visit vineyards where they may come across new wines and encounter other wine lovers and professionals with more experienced palates. Most important of all, the guides highlight is that one never stops trying out new wines to broaden one’s experience.
Despite all these differences, Teil argues, the guides have a similar goal. They all seek to help the reader acquire the skill to enjoy really good wines, *grand vins*, which implies the ability to recognise and distinguish them from ordinary wines, *vins de table*, or at least to pay attention to a wine and its difference to others. The first type of guides tries to achieve this by organising tasting-events in such a way that the reader is most likely to have an unbiased sensation; the second encourages the reader to gradually acquire the ability to perceive accurately and to distinguish between tastes. In both cases wine tasting is geared towards passing a judgment about a wine. This *judgment* is partly an expression of the wine drinker’s individual, personal preferences but should also be based on knowledge about the wine’s terroir, grape and production, the assets they may have and the faults they may display. Enjoying a *grand vin* includes the ability to describe what one sees, smells and tastes and what exactly makes this specific wine so enjoyable. It depends crucially on *knowing* wine. Wine guides, by teaching readers how to know wine, thus craft ‘knowing subjects’.

In the process other possible engagements with wine are sidelined. While wine lovers learn to talk about *balsamic*, *mouldy* and *geranium*, there is never any mention of other terms that might be useful in practices to do with drinking, such as *tipsy* or *completely wasted*. It is disentangled from drinking, sometimes very literally. There are wine tasting spittoons on the market, ranging from red plastic buckets that cost less than 20 Euros, to stainless steel ones of more than 200 Euros. Such tools, along with the instructions that the guides provide, help

---

43 This does not mean that a “personal preference” is taken to be stable. Teil points out that guides draw upon the possibility that wine amateurs are able to act upon their liking. For a case study on how Dutch dieticians teach people who want to lose weight to cultivate their capacity for pleasure, see Vogel & Mol (2014).

44 I also base my interpretation on Geneviève Teil’s account of the changes she underwent throughout the course of her fieldwork as she became a wine amateur (Teil, 1998).

45 For the investigation into food pleasure as an achievement in interaction among members of an online forum see Sneijder & te Molder (2006).

46 Just as drunkenness is ‘othered’ in wine tasting practices, the sensation of being caffeinated is not attended to in practices of coffee lovers (personal communication Manzo). My use of the term ‘othered’ is inspired by Law (2004).
to configure tasting as knowing — recognising colours, odours and flavours, — and as passing a verdict based on perceptions of the differences between them. Through this process, tasting becomes purified.47

**Mundane tasting: having a good time and stilling hunger**

That tasting is a practice in which a subject gets to know an object is not a general truth, but a specific achievement realised in wine tasting practices. There, with the help of guides and trainings, wine tasting is configured as a process of perceiving the qualities of the wine being tasted. In other practices, however, tasting is configured quite differently. In this section I will argue this by presenting my field notes from two situations of **mundane eating**. After both situations I made extensive notes as I felt that what was going on did not fit with the work on wine tasting that I had been reading.48 It took some time to articulate what did not fit exactly, but once I did it seemed almost too obvious, a recurring problem with analysing mundane cases. The first event took place on a Thursday evening in the winter of 2010 when, for a short while, my partner Christian and I were both living in Vienna.

*Field notes, Thursday 7th January 2010, evening, Josefstädterstrasse, Vienna*

Christian and I meet in front of the supermarket next to our apartment to buy groceries for dinner. I see the broccoli on offer and suggest cooking curry. Back in the apartment we chop vegetables, garlic, ginger and onion, heat oil in a pan, and then fry the vegetables. At some point, Christian puts a second pan on the stove and divides the vegetables between the two pans. To the first he adds coconut milk, which I don’t like. He tries it and adds more chillies. I try the second and add some ginger. Once the vegetables are done and the seasoning is finished, we take the pots to the table, sit down and serve ourselves. Christian takes a first bite. “Mmmm... fantastic.” I take a first bite,

47 For the notion of purification, see Latour (1993)
48 For the use of one’s sense that something is failing, disconcerting, or revealing in the middle of the night as an analytic clue, see Hennion (2007), Verran (1999), Winthereik & Verran (2012), Law & Lin (2009), and van de Port (2011).
too. “Yes, indeed.” I add some salt. We talk about what has happened at work that day and after a while refill our plates. “May I try yours?” “Go ahead.” Christian takes a piece of courgette from my plate. “Very good,” he comments and remarks: “Next time I’ll put less coconut milk into mine. It is a little bit bland.” “So, it is too bland, is it?” “Oh no, it’s very good.” We keep on eating and chatting. After some time, the two pans are empty and we are full.

In practices of mundane eating, tasting one’s food does not necessarily lead to a stable verdict. At the beginning of the meal, Christian’s curry is fantastic. A little later, it is too bland and, in spite of the extra chillies that he added, not as spicy as he hoped for. But as soon as I addressed this disappointment head on, it disappeared into thin air. Once again, the dish was very good. What is going on here? Was this a great curry or a bland one? The different evaluations remained hanging in the air. They were not drawn together into a single conclusion, but co-exist next to each other.

To understand what is going on here, it helps to look at the extensive analysis of evaluative remarks made during dinner table conversation that is presented by Sally Wiggins and Jonathan Potter (2003). They asked families with at least one child to record such conversations and then conducted a discourse analysis of 84 of them. What struck them is the different effects of judging a category versus judging an item (carrots versus the carrots). A child who does not want to eat carrots may try the categorical excuse I don’t like carrots. The encouraging adult may reply with asking about items on the plate. You don’t like the carrots? But you didn’t have many (523f.). Another striking contrast was that between evaluations that were made in subjective mode (I enjoyed it) and those pointing at the object (That was lovely). For example, if one says I like chicken, one is talking about one’s self and may be implicitly complementing the cook. Saying the chicken is lovely, on the other hand, is an explicit and much stronger compliment for the cook who prepared the dish. (519) According to Wiggins and Potter such verbal distinctions allow speakers to engage in different activities.
Wiggins and Potter’s work highlights that evaluative remarks made during dinner, even if they qualify the food, do not just regard the food, they can do all kinds of other things. So it is with the remarks that Christian made. Each of them had a different horizon. The positive qualification ‘fantastic’ expressed the pleasure of being able to eat a lovely warm curry. Christian, as an eater, enjoyed the sauce, coconut milk and all, that he soaked up with his naan-bread. The negative qualification, ‘it’s a little bit bland’, was made with regard to the future. Christian, as a cook, stated what he might improve the next time that he made this dish: add less coconut milk. And finally, the reassurance ‘oh no, it is very good’ was uttered by Christian the boyfriend, who underlined, with this positive appreciation, that he was enjoying the dinner. He juggled himself into the repertoire of ‘having a nice evening together’. The shared shopping, cooking and eating were pleasant activities to be cherished. It was agreeable to talk about the day and after the meal there would be a DVD to watch together. Overall, in this set of goings-on, the not-so-good is shifted aside, made irrelevant. The blandness of the curry was not allowed to spoil the evening. In mundane eating, then, a qualification of the food is not so much the expression of the informed perceptions of ‘a knowing subject’, but is tied up with one among several subject positions: eater, cook, boyfriend. While these positions partially overlap, they also partially diverge from each other. Christian, while tasting and talking, shifted between them.49

To further explore what tasting becomes in mundane eating practices, I next present you with field notes from a second situation which also took place in Vienna, close to a snack stall, a Döner-Bude.

That evening I had been to the cinema with two of my childhood friends, Susi and Philipp. Susi said she was hungry. Hence, on our way to the bar where we had planned to have a beer, we stopped at the Döner stall.

---

49 This resonates with Mol’s analysis of the various lives of the Dutch language question “Is het lekker?” (Mol, 2014). This shifts between a factual inquiry into the taste of the food (is it good?), a caring contribution to the moment of eating (much like ‘good afternoon’), and an encouragement to enjoy one’s food (‘this may be tasty, please, try’).
Field notes, Sunday 30th August 2009, evening, Währingerstrasse, Vienna

We are standing in front of the Döner-Bude. Philipp chooses a Döner Kebab, Susi a falafel sandwich, I go for the feta sandwich. The vendor prepares, accepts the money that, one by one we pay him, and hands over our food. I am last. When I join Philipp and Susi they are talking about the film that we just saw. I suggest that we sit on the stairs of the old building next to the stall. And so we do. Once we sit, Susi pulls down the paper that protects her sandwich and takes a bite. I start eating as well. Philipp presents us with his point of view about the film. At some point Susi remarks: “D’falafel sind ir- gendwie komisch. [The falafels are somehow funny…]” Philipp looks at the sandwich in his hands: “Hmmm, mine is quite okay.” I attend to my mouthful and reassuringly add: “Yeah, mine as well…” We resume our conversation about the film and continue eating. Philipp finishes first. He crumples the empty paper. Susi puts a few last bits and pieces of bread, sauce and falafel in her mouth. She chews and swallows. Then she leans back and sighs. “Ah, des hot jetzt ab’r guat g’schmeckt. I bin scho sooo hungrig gsi… [Now, that tasted good. I have been so hungry…]”

Here, after just a few bites, Susi brought up that the falafel was ‘somehow funny’. Philipp remarked that his sandwich was ‘quite okay’. I confirmed. We chewed and sensed, but the flavours we perceived remained vague, undifferentiated. What exactly rendered Susi’s falafel ‘somehow funny’ was never articulated. Once the sandwiches had been finished they were evaluated again. This time it was not how they felt in the mouth that was commented on, but the effects that followed from swallowing them. Susi in particular, whose hunger had prompted the occasion for this meal, sighed contently. Her falafel had stilled her hunger in a satisfying way. The term she used to express her satisfaction was a particular one: tasting. It was the German, more
precisely the Vorarlberger dialect version of the verb *schmecken* that she mobilised. This translates into English as ‘to taste’.\textsuperscript{50} No longer ‘somehow funny’, the falafel now had tasted *good*.

I suggest that we take Susi’s expression, that the sandwich “tasted good”, literally.\textsuperscript{51} The implication is that, in this particular situation, there was not just tasting in the mouth, but also, after swallowing, tasting in the belly. My suggestion ties in with the one that as a group of co-authors we made in our paper “Mixing Methods, Tasting Fingers” (2011). There, Annemarie Mol, Priya Satalkar, Amalinda Savirani, Nasima Selim, Malini Sur, Emily Yates-Doerr and I reported on an ethnographic experiment conducted in Amsterdam. We had a hot meal of rice, dal and other delicacies that we ate with our hands. Four of us were finger eating experts, the other three were novices. We all made field notes afterwards and wrote about hands chopping, noses smelling, fingers mashing and lifting up food balls, gently pushing them into our mouths, tongues licking and bellies digesting. In our article we suggested that, in the situation described, it made little sense to reserve the term ‘tasting’ for the activities of tongue and, at most, the nose. Instead, in our experimental meal, tasting began when our fleshy fingers encountered food and it went on to when our full bellies digested the soul-warming meal. And so it is for the mundane, non-experimental situation of eating a falafel, kebab or feta sandwich after the film. Here, there was tasting in the mouth, and then there was tasting in the belly — no, not the ‘stomach’ or the ‘intestines’ as I am describing a situation of everyday life, the everyday life terms fit better here. What the belly tasted was good. There was the satisfying stilling of a nagging sense of hunger.

\textsuperscript{50} The word available in German for “to taste” is “schmecken.” It shares the Indo-German roots with the English word “smacking.” The German word for “to taste”/“to try and sample” is “verkosten.” It contains the word “Kost”, which means “nourishment”, also “cost”, and shares the Indo-German roots with “choosing” (Duden, 2001: 728).

\textsuperscript{51} Viveros de Castro has pointed out the effects the distinction between “metaphorical” and “literal.” “Where would we be,” de Castro rhetorically asks, “without this statutory distinction between the literal and the metaphoric, which strategically blocks any direct confrontation between [the material] and [the social], thereby avoiding any major unpleasantness?” (2004: 14) It makes, so Castro, that one reality comes to count as “the real” one.
In wine tasting, mouth, nose and eyes are used to taste wine that is subsequently spit out. Mouth, nose and eyes are isolated from the rest of the body. However, in situations of mundane eating, food is rarely spat out. Rather, it tends to be welcomed into a longing body. In such situations then, *tasting* may include sensations located in a belly. What is more: rather than ‘carrying the taster away into the domain of subjectivity’ eating helps to constitute ‘a subject’. It allows a person to keep going. In the situation described above, our sandwiches allowed the hungry Susi in particular, but also Philipp and myself, to continue to enjoy our evening out and go on for the beer that we had promised ourselves. In this process, tasting comes to flow over and blend into what happens before and afterwards.

**Devoted tasting: appreciating life and praying to God**

Wine guides teach their readers how to be a subject able to know and enjoy a good glass of wine. In mundane eating practices people may shift between different subject positions that imply a different relation to their food. Hence, in the situations reviewed so far tasting involves ‘a subject’ in different ways. But does tasting necessarily involve a ‘subject’? One might think it would, but I will argue that it does not. Subjectivities emerging through practices of tasting can also take the form of an ‘undoing of being a subject’, I discovered through fieldwork in a nunnery, the Benedictine convent “Kloster Fahr”.

Kloster Fahr is located in the middle of Switzerland in a small village called Fahr. It is inhabited by a group of women who live there according to the rules of Saint Benedict. In the fifth century AD, Benedict wrote a set of precepts that instructed his followers on how to form a Christian community and live together in a convent or a monastery. These Rules stipulate in detail how to go about

---

52 See for the subject of eating also Mol (2008b), Abrahamsson (2014), Bonelli (2014).
53 For differences in the ways in which one set of practices enacts subjectivity in diverging ways, for example, scientific practices configuring the subject of the scientist, see Mialet (1999). The notion of ‘undoing’ is taken from Stefan Hirschauer, who has developed it on the basis of an investigation of the ‘undoing’ of the gendered subject (2001).
54 One of the reasons that Saint Benedict’s Rules are still followed today, is that they offer a
daily life, including how to eat: “Making allowance for the infirmities of different persons, we believe that for the daily meal (...) two kinds of cooked food are sufficient at all meals; so that he who perchance cannot eat of one, may make his meal of the other.” These rules help to organise life in Kloster Fahr for more than 25 nuns ranging in age from mid-40s to well above 90. The two youngest among them function as prioress and sub-prioress, leading the congregation. At the time that I stayed there, there were also other visitors: a photographer taking pictures for the nunnery’s website and a young woman who had earlier, after she had finished school, spent six months at Fahr and had now returned because she missed the monastic life. Besides its living quarters, the convent includes a school for farming and a school for household economics (both for young women), a vineyard, a huge vegetable garden, a small herbal garden, a stable with pigs and cows, several workshops, and a guesthouse with rooms rented out to visitors.

The days in the nunnery were structured around the five daily prayers (5.20 a.m., at 7 a.m., at 11 a.m., at 5 p.m. and 7.45 pm) and were otherwise filled with work in the garden, the kitchen, the office, the workshops, the school or the wash room. In between these activities there was a lunch:

Field notes, 20th August 2011, noon, Kloster Fahr, Fahr

The church bells are ringing as the mass just finished. The nuns get up from the benches in their black habits and first form pairs, then a column. I stay close to Sister Martina, my official hostess, and we join the row. We exit the church through the back door and walk along the cloister. The column stops at the door of the refectory, where meals are taken. One nun after the other walks over the door sill, dips her hand into a lot of agency to the abbot or prioress (Zelzer, 1989). The universal rules can be adapted to fit local specificities. An example of this is the precept on drinking wine: “‘Everyone has her own gift from God, one in this way and another in that’ (1 Cor. 7:7). It is therefore with some misgiving that we regulate the measure of others’ sustenance. Nevertheless, keeping in view the needs of the weak, we believe that a hemina of wine a day is sufficient for each. But those to whom God gives the strength to abstain should know that they will receive a special reward. If the circumstances of the place, or the work or the heat of summer require a greater measure, the superior shall use her judgment in the matter, taking care always that there be no occasion for surfeit or drunkenness.”
small font with holy water, makes the sign of the cross, and walks to one of the three
tables in the room. We bow and the prioress says, “The king of eternal glory may let us
take part in the heavenly supper.”

When we are all seated, the two sisters on kitchen duty for the day serve the food.
First there is soup, then a main course. Two bowls are passed down the table. When
Sister Theresa, who is sitting to my right, serves herself from the first, I can see that it is
filled with cucumber salad. She passes me the bowl. I take a spoonful and then pass the
bowl on to Sister Martina who is sitting to my left. The second bowl contains lettuce and
we all take some. After it, a silver platter is passed through, filled with tomatoes from
the oven. A basil leaf is stuck on top of each tomato. Sister Theresa puts a tomato on her
plate, so do I. I pass on the platter. Lastly, there is a pot filled with risotto with mush-
rooms and cheese. I put a scoop on my plate and hand the pot to Sister Martina who is
sitting to my left. She also serves herself and passes the risotto to her neighbour. Finally
everyone has a plateful. Sister Martina takes up her spoon, spoons up a bit of risotto and
starts eating. Sister Theresa has cut the tomato, takes a bite, and then another. The food
on her plate disappears quickly. At another table, I can see a sister piercing a heap of
salad onto her fork and then putting it into her mouth. She looks into the air and takes
another bite. I take up my cutlery and eat.

The room is filled with words that come from a loudspeaker. A sister is reading out
loud from a novel. Earlier, during the soup, she read a passage from the Bible. Nobody
else speaks. Only cutlery clings against porcelain.

One after the other, the sisters around me finish. A basket of apples is passed
through and some of the sister takes one. Then we get up and walk around the table.
We bow and the prioress blesses us again. We walk towards the door. At the threshold,
Sister Martina dips her fingers into the font and hands me some water, too. We make the
sign of the cross and step the threshold. The nuns return to the church to thank God in
a prayer for their meal.

What is going here? At this table there are no separate subjects who taste in
order to get to know their food. In fact, there are no separate subjects at all.
This is not to say that at this table the food is not being valued. On the con-
trary, it is valued a great deal. God is thanked for it. Collectively, the nuns appreciate lunch as another way of appreciating life. Their tasting and eating does not just happen after and before their praying, it dissolves into it. Here, tasting is a devoted engagement with the world, a form of praying, yet another way of relating to God.

To support this analysis, here are some excerpts from the interview that the prioress granted to me at the beginning of my stay. She said, “Saint Benedict asked ‘Who is man who loves/appreciates life?’ [Wer is der Mensch, der das Leben liebt?] Benedictine spirituality aims at unfolding the joy of life [die Freude am Leben entfalten.] Because life is precious. It is a gift that God has granted to us. It is in this spirit that Saint Benedict wrote the Rules. They have been written to foster the appreciation of life [der Freude am Leben dienen]. Thus, we take care of and are careful [wir gehen achtsam um] with each other, with Nature, with all things given to us by the Lord.” The website of the convent and the brochure for visitors expresses the same spirit. The caption next to a picture of five nuns cycling in the meadows reads, “Benediktinerinnen — Frauen, die das Leben lieben.” How does this translate? The dictionary equates ‘lieben’ with ‘to love’ and ‘to appreciate’. In the light of the choice of the prioress’ words [“Freude am Leben entfalten/dienen”, “achtsam umgehen”], I think the adequate translation is: “Benedictines — women who appreciate life.”

This, or so I learned, was how, when submitting her candidacy for the post, the prioress summarised her readings of the writings of Saint Benedict and her vision for the nunnery Fahr. It was on the basis of this slogan that she had been elected.

The nunnery presents itself to the world outside the convent walls as a place of and for “women who appreciate life”. Others are welcome to join in. There are open masses and for women there is the option of taking a retreat in the con-
vent. Appreciating life is also important within the community. The prioress implements the Rules accordingly. “We have good and enough food, because eating nourishes. It gives life.” Hence, even if the Rules state that lunch ends with the main course and is not be followed by a dessert, apples are passed around after the main course. And when the berries in the garden were ripe, the prioress ordained they be served as dessert. They were, after all, “a gift from Nature, which has been created by the Lord”.

From Jeannette Pols (2005) we can learn how nurses and other care givers attend to likes and dislikes of patients who are not able to express these verbally. The health care professionals Pols observed created situations, which she described, in which patients could demonstrate their likes and dislikes through their actions. To theorise this, Pols, as an analyst, introduced the notion of “enacting appreciation”. “In a given material environment, in situations that are co-produced with others, [patients] enact appreciation,” she argued (203). What I learned during my fieldwork in Kloster Fahr was that appreciation can also be an emic category. This English term was best able to capture what the nuns talked about, “das Leben lieben”, “Freude am Leben entfalten/dienen”, “achtsam umgehen”. In Fahr, “enacting appreciation” happened, in this sense, more literally.

At the same time as talking about, the nuns also do their appreciation. One of their ways of doing this is by praying. Before and after the meals, and at various other moment throughout the day, they thank God for their food. This includes making ritualised movements such as folding hands, kneeling down and bowing, and making the sign of the cross with holy water. And, as Psalm number 147 calls upon the devoted to “Praise the Lord!”, it lists, “He fills you with the finest of wheat” among His praiseworthy deeds.

On the evening of the day of the lunch that I just described, I picked up a herbal infusion tea in the kitchen. A small, thin nun asked me: “Did you notice the basil leaf on each tomato? Our chef cooks food that is not just as delicious as what you would get in a restaurant. She cooks with love! We are really lucky with her.” And on our way to the afternoon prayers, Sister Martina (who has
lived a monastic life for more than three decades) remarked: “Lunch was good. [Das Essen war gut.] Having had a good lunch always makes praying easier afterwards.” Sister Martina did not say “it tasted good”, nor did I hear any of the other nuns use the relevant German term schmecken. “It tasted good” would have implied a ‘me’ to whom the food had tasted good, it would have implied a differentiation from others. This the nuns avoided. They refrained from turning themselves into a separated entity, an ‘I’ with an individual taste preference. For such a modern mode of living is exactly what they renounced by entering the convent to live a Christian life in a collective. Tasting, as it is configured in devoted living, involves thus a subjectivity in which people refrain from entering into a position of ‘being a subject’.

In Kloster Fahr appreciating food includes abstaining from talking during mealtimes. There is one reader, the other nuns remain silent. As an ethnographer I found this difficult. How could I study tasting if I could not ask Sister Martina how she liked her tomatoes and risotto during the meal? I would stare at the nun sitting opposite me, hoping for clues in her facial expression that would betray whether she did or did not enjoy the apple she was chewing. Looking back, however, I realised that this was a mistake. I had been attempting to make sense of tasting in the nunnery on the terms of wine tasting, where an individual body may learn to know and enjoy the flavours and smells that it encounter, but that is not relevant to what happens in the convent. There the point is not to get to know and judge one’s food, but to appreciate it, no matter what. Sometimes this is not easy. One of the younger sisters told me that when she entered the convent three elderly sisters shared the cooking. “They cooked

55 The relation between sensual engagements with food and talking or writing about it has been extensively studied, among others by Shapin (2012b), Teil (1997), Sneijder & te Molder (2006), Wiggins & Potter (2003). The same cannot be said about the relation between liking and disliking food, not talking, and remaining silent. In studies on tasting, there is a “bias” towards analysing talking in a similar way as, as Sarah Davies has pointed out, in research on public engagements with science (Davies, 2014).

56 Strategies that have been used by ethnographers to study “tasting” were to record words as indicators for perceptual experiences and observe which food items are consumed and which ones not. For the former see Sutton (2001) and the latter Howes (2003), for instance. This issue — which activities count as examples of one practice — has recently been debated about by Annemarie Mol (2011) and Marilyn Strathern (2011a; 2011b).
the vegetables a lot, until they were very soft. We never had raw vegetables. The kitchen really was... Ahmm... Yeah... When the new cook arrived, I found, ‘Oh, that’s so delicious!’” Note that before she slipped into criticising the old cooks, this nun shifted to praising the new cooks. Someone who criticises that which has been provided by the Lord, seems to assume she is able to judge His mysterious ways. This is presumptuous, a sin. By learning to appreciate soft vegetables, a nun is grateful for what the Lord has provided and makes space for Him in her.

In the Kloster Fahr, tasting food that is not particularly good provides an opportunity to stay humble in the face of God and appreciate His gifts. When, on the other hand, the food is special, one can be all the more thankful and appreciative. But that food is good is not to say that it ‘tastes good’. What happens is not an encounter between food and a tasting individual subject, separated from others. Rather, food is shared among a collective. Dishes are passed around between those who sit at a table and the goodness of the food is attributed and re-attributed to the good cook who prepares food with love, the wonderful garden, nature itself, and ultimately God. Here, tasting is taking part in, enacting, and performing appreciation. It is a form of praying to God and of being in relation with Him. It dissolves into it.

Knowing and other ways of being in the world

Shapin (2012a) has encouraged us to study subjective knowing, rather than remaining focused on scientific attempts to strive after objectivity. The example he proposed is that of tasting, and he began by historically exploring wine tasting himself. Geneviève Teil (1997; 1998; 2001; 2009) studied wine tasting ethnographically. Revisiting her work, located in France and in French, we saw that, in guides that educate people to take up wine tasting seriously, knowing is an important prerequisite for judging and even for enjoying good wines, ‘grand vins’. This is something people cannot just do naturally, but that the wine guides encourage them to do, either by creating the right setting in which
they taste, or by gradually acquiring and embodying the skills it takes. But wine tasting is not the only kind of tasting there is. It is actually quite unusual, if only because in this particular kind of practice tasting is separated from drinking. Wine is to be spit out. This is quite different in most other practices where people taste their food and drink. Of these I presented two cases, points of contrast, where tasting is done in different ways.

In mundane eating, I proposed, tasting is not a matter of subjects getting to know and thus learning to judge their foods. Rather, other things take precedence. As Christian shifted his evaluation of a vegetable curry from fantastic, to bland, to great, he also shifted between subject positions. He first took up the subject position of the eager eater, then that of the cook planning ahead (less coconut milk next time) and finally that of the boyfriend caring about a pleasant evening together. And as Susi first took her falafel to taste funny, and later sighed that it had tasted good, she temporarily shifted aside our conversation about the film, while gathering new physical strength needed to make it to the bar. To her mouth the falafel may have felt funny, to her belly it felt great. Here, food that is tasted is not being known, it is being eaten.

In devotional living, I argued, knowing and judging are even less the point. What matters there is appreciating food, no matter what. Food is a gift of God and deserves to be thanked for. If it is special, a nun may underline this and give credit to cooks, garden, food and God again, but she will not single herself out as ‘a subject’. Nuns renounce from entering a position of ‘being a subject’. Instead, they collectively enact appreciation, and their tasting is a form of praying and being in relation to God.

As one starts contrasting tasting as it is configured in different sets of practices, one recognises also that the relation between tasting and what happens around it differs. In wine tasting, it becomes disentangled from drinking and purified. A work lunch, a family meal, a party are yet other occasions to try and gain more experiences with wine. In contrast, tasting within mundane eating
flows over and blends into shopping, watching a DVD, going for a beer, enjoying an evening together. In devotional living tasting dissolves altogether. It becomes yet another way of enacting appreciation and being in relation to God.

So here is my conclusion. What STS can learn from tasting is not just how subjects get to know the world. There are two more lessons. One is about the differences in which, in practices of tasting, subjectivities are done. People are neither simply nor necessarily ‘knowing subjects’. They also may take on different subject positions or may renounce being ‘a subject’ altogether. The second is that ‘knowing’ is just one of many ways of being in and engaging with the world. ‘Eating’ and ‘enjoying’, ‘praying’ and ‘appreciating’ are other ones.

References


