Tasting in mundane practices: Ethnographic interventions in social science theory
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Physiological response, multi-sensorial experience, context, knowing: unpacked

This thesis has offered an investigation into tasting. What is going on as a person is tasting food or drinks? “Sensation,” David Howes says, “is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression.” (Howes, 2003: xi). Jon Holtzman has claimed that, through taste, people “view and experience their world and (...) are constituted as persons within it” (Holtzman, 2009: 5). And, according to Steven Shapin, “Taste is one among many modes of subjectivity” (Shapin, 2012: 172); and subjectivity is “a knowledge-making mode” like objectivity (170).

In social science literature, tasting has been accounted for very specifically: the assumption is that when a person tastes an object, a physiological response takes place in the person’s body and, at the same time, he or she multi-sensorially experiences qualities of the tasted object. The process, it has been further assumed, is influenced by the material, social and cultural environment, the context, in which it takes place, and leads to the person knowing about the tasted object and having made sense of the world he or she lives in.
Taking a material semiotic approach, rather than accepting this account, I have been puzzled by it and have made it an issue. In the last four chapters, by mobilising ethnographic material from different situations and sites in Western Europe in which I observed how people sensually engaged with food and drinks, I have engaged with what is taken for granted. Let me retrace that journey.

To begin with, Chapter Two started with the “physiological response”, which had been referred to in general terms by David Howes. It considered how taste in humans is studied in the field of sensory science. I reported from two ethnographically observed experiments: one on flavour perception in chocolate liquids and the second on satiation in equally palatable sweet and savoury meals. Both experiments proceeded by quantifying, standardising, crafting generalisability and comparability, and configured tasting as an object of quantitative science and as a bodily response. At the same time, tasting, through the technical set-up it was staged in, was enacted in different versions: as a perception in one, as a reaction to an exposure in the other. The chapter, in other words, took the “physiological response”, investigated how “taste in humans” is represented and enacted in specific ways in natural scientific research practices that are local, and showed how these may differ.

Following the consideration of the “physiological response”, Chapter Three moved on to the “multi-sensory experience” that a leading gastronomic expert stated that tasting is. It focused on eating out in restaurants, and one event in particular, a family celebration in the Gasthaus Nibelungenhof in Austria. Analysing the micro-practices family members engaged in as they became involved in moments in which something “schmeckt gut”, I teased out three ways of organising and ordering sensual engagements with food. The first was talking about flavours, discarding a clove of garlic and directing another person’s attention, thus organising sensual engagements as a process of experiencing. In the event that I observed, this was not the only ordering. There was also taking a bite of a food item offered as a present, and praising the family member who offered it for it, and also managing to chew with dentures a dish that had been ordered.
by someone else. In these cases, a moment in which something “schmeckt gut” was preceded by organising sensual engagements with foods as a process of socialising and processing, respectively. The chapter pointed out that “experiencing” can be an outcome of micro-practices people engage in and through which they order tasting as they eat out, but there are other outcomes as well. It, thus, articulated other modes of ordering tasting, alternatives that exist next to it.

And how did “the context” influence tasting? Chapter Four moved on to everyday life practices, working and living in a hospital, the Kantonsspital Graubünden, in Switzerland. It analysed what was brought up by doctors, patients and nurses, and what could be observed ethnographically as the difference that made a difference to their sensual engagements with food. This was the time it took for a catheter to be inserted, the radiography meeting after lunch, the chattiness of another patient, and the vomit full of old clotted blood that a nurse cleaned up before her midday break. I theorised these as “mundane goings-on.” At the same time, the chapter traced the socio-material research practices Pierre Bourdieu, Günter Wiegelmann and Geneviève Teil engaged in, the choices they made about what mattered most for people’s sensual engagements with food, and the representation, description and/or explanation they subsequently provided in their studies on “taste”, “eating” and “tasting”. I showed how, rather than being a given, “the context” of tasting is the outcome of social scientific research practices, which differ, and according to which the “context” itself also differs: “society”, “food culture”, “practice” and “mundane goings-on”. Thus, I concluded that it is not possible to determine in advance the context that matters for tasting.

What is the outcome of tasting? Starting from Steven Shapin’s suggestion that subjectivity and subjective ways of knowing be investigated through the case of tasting, Chapter five considered how tasting becomes configured in three sets of practices. It contrasted wine tasting practices observed by Geneviève Teil with mundane eating practices my friends engaged in, and devoted living that I observed in a Benedictine convent, Kloster Fahr in Switzerland. That tasting is a process through which a person becomes a subject who knows
about an object and the world in which he or she lives is not a general truth, the chapter brought out, but a specific achievement in wine tasting practices. In mundane eating, in contrast, tasting is configured as stilling one’s hunger and people shift between subject positions while in devoted living tasting becomes a way for people, who renounce from being ‘a subject’, to appreciate life and God. The chapter, in other words, localised knowing in a specific set of practices and shed light on the work that goes into configuring it in this particular way. At the same time, it articulated alternative ways of enacting tasting and, through it, ways of being and engaging in the world.

In the last four chapters, I have thus engaged with big, abstract entities that are taken for granted in social science literature. Each has taken one entity and opened it up by either investigating it in its specificity (physiological response), articulating alternatives that exist beside it (experience), showing the process of constructing it (context), and localising it in particular practices (knowing). “Physiological response”, “multi-sensorial experience”, “context”, and “knowing” have thus been unpacked.

Crafting an alternative: Tasting as a composite

At the same time as unpacking the big abstract entities that tend to be taken for granted in social science literature, I have investigated how tasting is done in a variety of practices. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Western Europe and drawing on my observations in different situations and sites of how people sensually engaged with food and drinks, the individual chapters provided insights into tasting in natural science research, eating out in a restaurant, working and living in a hospital, non-professional wine tasting, mundane eating, and working, eating and praying in a Benedictine convent. I showed how “taste in humans” is enacted as a bodily response (although not the same one) in sensory science research; how the “tasting” that precedes moments in which something “schmeckt gut” is organised either as a process of experiencing, socialising or processing in eating out; how sensual engagements and appreciation of food,
including moments in which something “schmeckt gut”, are events that do or do not occur in working and living in a hospital; and how tasting becomes configured as a perception in tasting wine, as stilling of hunger in mundane eating, and as appreciating life and God in devoted living.

Consequently, rather than studying tasting as a practice on its own, I have shed light on tasting as a practice that takes place within other mundane practices. Within these practices, tasting was situated in quite different ways. I think it is now possible to tease out differences between the ways in which tasting is part of mundane goings-on. First, as the difference between eating out and working in a hospital illustrates, some goings-on leave more, others less time for sensual engagements with food to occur. While long working hours and patients with multiple afflictions inhibited moments in which something tasted good, in eating out there was enough time to organise tasting as an experiencing. In the family celebration that I observed, there was even enough time to care for others and facilitate that a dish “tasted good” to them. Furthermore, the hierarchy between the practice that tasting is part of and tasting varies. The last chapter brought this out in particular. Tasting wine non-professionally disentangled tasting from drinking and daily concerns. In that practice, tasting became purified. In contrast, in the nunnery in Fahr, nuns were exposed to food during eating, working and praying, and the tasting there was used as yet another way of enacting appreciation and relating to God. It was utterly embedded and dissolved in devoted living. And, we should not forget, that tasting appears as a clearly bounded entity, an object, is itself the effect of the practices that it is part of. The second chapter showed this. Configuring taste in humans as a discerned and discernible, neatly packaged entity, an object of quantitative science, a bodily response, requires a lot that is not shied away from in sensory science research practices.

The sensual engagements of food and drinks that I observed ethnographically in different situations and sites in Western Europe often did not involve English. Sensory science research projects were presented to me by the scientists involved in them as being about “taste in humans”. But while all the researchers
I spoke to used the same English term, “taste”, what their experiments investigated differed: flavour perception in one, sensory specific satiation in another. Sensory science laboratories turned out to be the only site in which “something happening” became presented to me so explicitly, and in English, as “taste”. In other situations and sites, I witnessed people doing something, for instance adding salt to grated potatoes, choosing between the options a menu provided, or discarding a clove of garlic. In one situation, “tasting” [“Verkostung”] was a word that an informant pointed at. There were also moments of people talking about flavours, for instance, commenting that a piece of quiche was “lighter than expected”. In some of these, people used the expression that something “tasted good.” But not in English. A lot of my fieldwork happened in German (including Swiss-German) and some of it in Dutch. And while native English speakers might not have expressed that they enjoyed indulging in the desserts they were served in a hospital by stating that these food items “tasted best” to them, my informant did, saying, in Swiss-German, “Die schmeckan m’r immer am beschta!”

Rather than establishing a common ground, I have left visible how “something happening” between food and bodies involved talking, writing, pointing at words in English und Deutsch und Schwyzerdütsch, noublions pas le Français (the language used in the wine tasting practices Geneviève Teil observed), en ook een beetje Neederlands in the various practices the chapters investigated.

Bringing together “taste in humans”, the “tasting” that precedes moments in which something “schmeckt gut”, sensual engagements and appreciation of food, including moments in which something “schmeckt gut” done in a variety of mundane practices analysed in the previous chapters provides an alternative pictures of tasting. The tasting that has been crafted is a composite of various entities in various languages resonating with the English term “tasting”:
Outlook on “the good” in tasting

This research into tasting began with the aim of investigating moments in which something “tastes good” so as to provide insights into “the good”. However, when I began observing ethnographically sensual engagements with food
and drinks in different situations and sites in Western Europe and engaging with the social science literature, it turned out to be necessary to first focus on tasting. I never came to move on to study the issue I had originally set out to investigate. While this thesis has left largely unexplored the “good”, the preceding chapters do provide a starting point for studying it. Let me spell out the preliminary insights they yield.

The prologue began with field notes from a breakfast buffet for a film crew catered by professional caterers on an ordinary Thursday morning near Amsterdam. I would argue that it was the windy cold weather and the early morning hours that made a technician enjoy his breakfast. In the sensory science research practices, described in chapter two, the primary concern was not that something “tastes good”. In one of the experiments, a breakfast ad libitum food intake study, two yoghurts that were not particularly tasty (I found out by trying one) were served to the participants. At that site, people let themselves be paid for taking in food objects. By doing so, they contributed to other “goods”. As they enrolled as research subjects, they enabled scientists to do science. Additionally, taking part in the study on the flavour perception in liquid chocolates, through the findings that were subsequently used by food producers, allowed for the optimisation of food production processes. And participating in the experiment on satiation in equally palatable sweet and savoury meals shed light on and enabled policy makers to organise eating and not overeating in an environment of abundance. Tasting, in this case, enacted other “goods”, such as science, the optimisation of food production, and eating in abundance.

Very different were the eating out practices in chapter three. During the family celebration in the restaurant Gasthaus Nibelungenhof people arranged their own bodies, the culinary masterpieces that were served to them, the other bodies and things around them in specific ways. They crafted and became part of moments in which something “schmeckt gut”. These moments looked quite different. In one, a perceptual experience took place, in another a social relation became actualised, and in the third a practical achievement happened. In the moments of something tasting good, the “goodness” lay in a variety of entities.
It arose as an effect of qualities inherent in food objects matching those in the dining room, it was the love with which a cake had been baked by another family member, and, last but not at least, it was the success of managing to process food items with dentures.

Chapter four brought out that, in the everyday life practices of living and working in a hospital in Switzerland, tasting is affected temporally, emotionally, and materially by what happens before, around and after eating. At that site, whether something tasted good was the effect of organisational structures people were embedded in. Sometimes these allowed the doctors, patients and nurses to sensually engage and appreciate food they ate. When this happened, the “goodness” was found in yet again different entities. On one day, the tasks a doctor had been assigned left her enough time to sit down and, during the lunch, lay down the cutlery. In another case, a patient enjoyed indulging in a dessert and engaging with food in general. It was “something positive at least”, in contrast to the disease with which she was afflicted. And in a third example, a nurse appreciated her dinner as it happened without having the stenches and smells of vomit full of old clotted blood still in her nose.

Finally, chapter five reported from non-professional wine tasting, mundane eating and devoted living. Each of these goings-on configured tasting in a specific way that affected whom something “tasted good” to, and what “the goodness” then consisted of. In wine tasting practices, ‘a subject’ was enacted. That something tasted good was the effect of this subject knowing and recognising a “grand vin.” In contrast, in mundane eating practices people shifted between subject positions. That something tasted good shifted accordingly. It was the outcome of having a dinner together after a day of work, and having filled one’s belly. In the Benedictine convent, people refrained from becoming ‘a subject’ altogether, so the goodness of a dish was assigned to the chef, to Nature, and ultimately always to God. Even not so delicious foodstuff “was good”, because it allowed a nun to become more humble and make more space for God in her.
The preceding chapters have provided a preliminary list of where and what the “good” can be found in tasting: in bodies and body parts, in eating and activities that happen during a meal, in foodstuff and other objects, in other “bigger” goods, and in God. Moving from tasting as a physiological response and multi-sensory experience in a context that engenders knowing to tasting as being configured in different ways in a variety of mundane practices alters our understanding of “the good”. That something “tastes good” can be the effect of the tasted object having particular qualities, or the tasting person having specific preferences or a passionate attachment to an object. What this investigation into tasting as configured in different ways in various practices also brings out is how something “tasting good” is a relational effect between tasting and the mundane practices it is part of. It can lie in the contrast between tasting and other happenings around it, such as windy cold weather or misery caused by disease. “The good” becomes relational. This is what the example, with which I want to conclude, also suggests. In this particular case, that something “tastes good” is the outcome of tasting providing a break from ethnographically studying tasting:
AFTERLUDE: MMMM...

Field notes, 30th March 2011, Rembrandtplein, in the centre of Amsterdam

Peter, Jonna, Frank and I have spent the last two hours cooking.

Peter had put flour and eggs together and formed a dough. He had rolled it out, fitted it into five forms, added postelein, a leafy vegetable, as a filling and milk mixed with eggs. They went into the oven. In the meantime, Jonna had fetched, from the storage van, a crate of pears, peeled them and cut them in large cubes. I had given her a hand. Then, she had taken two large baking trays and filled them with the cubes. Peter had put a mixture of flour and butter, and walnuts on top. As in the morning, Frank had taken care of setting up benches nearby, this time in an old building that was situated at one of the ends of the place on which the kitchen van was parked. While the chefs were busy in the kitchen van, the film crew had shot another scene of the film, this time one in which one of the abductors hangs out with his friends in a bar.

Once the chopping, baking and frying was finished and two salads, quiches, Wienschnitzel, beans and leek, and a walnut crumble had been prepared, Jonna, Frank and I had carried them to the benches that Frank had set up, arranged them, and carried plates and cutlery out there as well. Then, one after the other, and sometimes in groups, actors, technicians, make-up and costume experts, extras and other participants of the crew came and served themselves food. “Lekker, jongens!”, one of the younger technicians had exclaimed as he was standing in front of the tray filled with Wienschnitzel.
In the end, all of the 65 people had been served and were eating sitting on the benches. Jonna, Frank and I fetched plates too. Jonna took a piece of quiche, added some of the cucumber and tomato salad. Frank put a piece of Wienschnitzel on his, together with some of the beans and leek. I went for a piece of quiche and salad as well. We sat down and started eating.

Now, our plates are empty. “We should get up…”, Jonna remarks. “I’m tired,” Frank sighs. I am tired too. I got up at 4am to be at the caterer’s house at 5am. From there we set off to be in time at 6am at the first location. At 7am breakfast had been ready. I have tried to be in the way as little as possible, to give a hand as often as possible, and, in between, have observed, taken notes, asked questions and taken pictures. I am longing for a bed to lie down on. “There is still crumble left,” Frank points out. “I am sooo full.” Jonna states. “I’ll take some. It looked good…” Frank and I get up with our plates and walk back to the buffet. He takes a scoop of the crumble. And I take another one. We return to the table where Jonna is sitting and sit down next to her. I take up my fork and shovel on it a cube of fruit, a big piece of crumble and two walnuts. I take the bite. “Mmmm…” It’s delicious! The crumble, the nuts, the pears… It tastes good. Really, really good.

References

