

Edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer

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# The Taste Culture Reader

EXPERIENCING FOOD AND DRINK

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A timely and valuable resource on the wide-ranging topic of taste across the disciplines, from biology to sociology to gastronomic literature and philosophy, by pathbreaking writers in these fields: Denise Gigante, *Syracuse University*

From Eve's apple to Proust's madeleine to today's culinary tourism, food looms large in culture. Sociologists and anthropologists study cooking and eating practices across the globe. Debates about health and nutrition are common in news reports. Yet despite its fundamental relationship to food, taste is mysteriously absent from most of these discussions.

A rich range of disciplinary perspectives, both western and nonwestern, that engages taste as at once innate and profoundly cultural!

Jennifer Fisher, *York University, Ontario*

The flavors of food permeate social relations, religious and other occasions. Charged with memory, emotion, desire, and aversion, taste is arguably the most evocative of the senses. *The Taste Culture Reader* explores the sensuous dimensions of eating and drinking, from the physiology of the tongue to the embodiment of social identities and enactment of ceremonial meanings. A cornucopia of historical, cross-cultural and theoretical views is offered, drawing from anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, science — and more. This book will interest anyone seeking to understand more fully the importance of food and flavor in human experience.

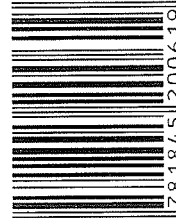
Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Professor of Philosophy, State University of New York at Buffalo*



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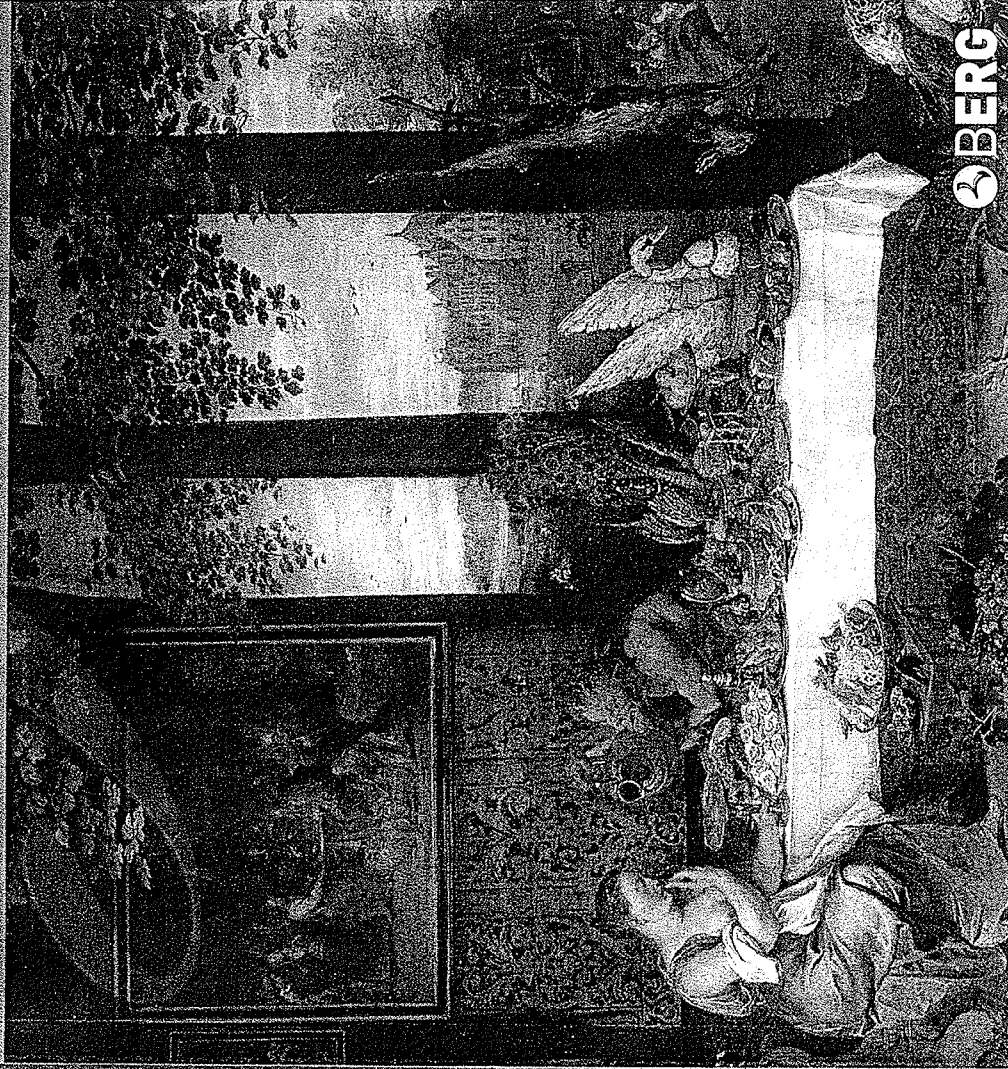


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# The Taste Culture Reader

Korsmeyer (Ed.)



SENSORY FORMATIONS SERIES

SENSORY FORMATIONS

Series Editor: David Howes

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# The Taste Culture Reader

## Experiencing Food and Drink

Edited by

CAROLYN KORSMEYER



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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	ix
<b>Introduction: Perspectives on Taste</b> <i>Carolyn Korsmeyer</i>	1
<b>Part I: Taste: Physiology and Circumstance</b>	
<i>Preface</i>	13
<b>1</b> On Taste <i>Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin</i>	15
<b>2</b> Chemical Senses: Taste and Smell <i>Linda M. Bartoshuk and Valerie B. Duffy</i>	25
<b>3</b> Culinary Themes and Variations <i>Elisabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin</i>	34
<b>3a</b> Flavor Principles: Some Applications <i>Elisabeth Rozin</i>	42
<b>Part II: Taste Cultures: Gustation in History</b>	
<i>Preface</i>	49
<b>4</b> Retrieving Tastes: Two Sources of Cuisine <i>Jean-François Revel</i>	51
<b>5</b> The High and the Low: Culinary Culture in Asia and Europe <i>Jack Goody</i>	57
<b>6</b> Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity <i>Pierre Bourdieu</i>	72

exclusively or principally cultural on the one hand, mainly economic on the other, and the different forms of relation to works of art which result from them, the different fractions of the dominant class are oriented towards cultural practices so different in their style and object and sometimes so antagonistic (those of 'artists' and 'bourgeois')<sup>1</sup> that it is easy to forget that they are variants of the same fundamental relationship to necessity and to those who remain subject to it, and that each pursues the exclusive appropriation of legitimate cultural goods and the associated symbolic profits...

Even the field of primary tastes is organized according to the fundamental opposition, with the antithesis between quantity and quality, belly and palate, matter and manners, substance and form.

The fact that in the realm of food the main opposition broadly corresponds to differences in income has masked the secondary opposition which exists, both within the middle classes and within the dominant class, between the fractions richer in cultural capital and less rich in economic capital and those whose assets are structured in the opposite way. Observers tend to see a simple effect of income in the fact that, as one rises in the social hierarchy, the proportion of income spent on food diminishes, or that, within the food budget, the proportion spent on heavy, fatty, fattening foods, which are also cheap – pasta, potatoes, beans, bacon, pork – declines, as does that spent on wine, whereas an increasing proportion is spent on leaner, lighter (more digestible), non-fattening foods (beef, veal, mutton, lamb, and especially fresh fruit and vegetables). Because the real principle of preferences is taste, a virtue made of necessity, the theory which makes consumption a simple function of income has all the appearances to support it, since income plays an important part in determining distance from necessity. However, it cannot account for cases in which the same income is associated with totally different consumption patterns. Thus, foremen remain attached to 'popular' taste although they earn more than clerical and commercial employees, whose taste differs radically from that of manual workers and is closer to that of teachers.

... The true basis of the differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity. The former are the tastes of individuals who are the product of material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity, by the freedoms or facilities stemming from possession of capital; the latter express, precisely in their adjustment, the necessities of which they are the product. Thus it is possible to deduce popular tastes for the foods that are simultaneously most 'filling' and most economical, from the necessity of reproducing labour power at the lowest cost, which is forced on the proletariat as its very definition. The idea of taste, typically bourgeois, since it presupposes absolute freedom of choice, is so closely associated with the idea of freedom that many people find it hard to grasp the paradoxes of

6

# Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity

*Pierre Bourdieu*

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate. But one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless 'culture', in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into 'culture' in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food...

In cultural consumption, the main opposition, by overall capital value, is between the practices designated by their rarity as distinguished, those of the fractions richest in both economic and cultural capital, and the practices socially identified as vulgar because they are both easy and common, those of the fractions poorest in both these respects. In the intermediate position are the practices which are perceived as pretentious, because of the manifest discrepancy between ambition and possibilities. In opposition to the dominated condition, characterized, from the point of view of the dominant, by the combination of forced poverty and unjustified laxity, the dominant aesthetic – of which the work of art and the aesthetic disposition are the most complete embodiments – proposes the combination of ease and asceticism, i.e. self-imposed austerity, restraint, reserve, which are affirmed in that absolute manifestation of excellence, relaxation in tension.

This fundamental opposition is specified according to capital composition. Through the mediation of the means of appropriation available to them,



the taste of necessity. Some simply sweep it aside, making practice a direct product of economic necessity (workers eat beans because they cannot afford anything else), failing to realize that necessity can only be fulfilled, most of the time, because the agents are inclined to fulfil it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to. Others turn it into a taste of freedom, forgetting the conditionings of which it is the product, and so reduce it to pathological or morbid preference for (basic) essentials, a sort of congenital coarseness, the pretext for a class racism which associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat. Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary ...

Eating habits, especially when represented solely by the produce consumed, cannot of course be considered independently of the whole lifestyle. The most obvious reason for this is that the taste for particular dishes (of which the statistical shopping-basket gives only the vaguest idea) is associated, through preparation and cooking, with a whole conception of the domestic economy and of the division of labour between the sexes. A taste for elaborate casserole dishes (*pot-au-feu*, *blanquette*, *daube*), which demand a big investment of time and interest, is linked to a traditional conception of woman's role. Thus there is a particularly strong opposition in this respect between the working classes and the dominated fractions of the dominant class, in which the women, whose labour has a high market value (and who, perhaps as a result, have a higher sense of their own value) tend to devote their spare time rather to childcare and the transmission of cultural capital, and to contest the traditional division of domestic labour. The aim of saving time and labour in preparation combines with the search for light, low-calorie products, and points towards grilled meat and fish, raw vegetables, frozen foods, yogurt and other milk products, all of which are diametrically opposed to popular dishes, the most typical of which is *pot-au-feu*, made with cheap meat that is boiled (as opposed to grilled or roasted), a method of cooking that chiefly demands time. It is no accident that this form of cooking symbolizes one state of female existence and of the sexual division of labour (a woman entirely devoted to housework is called 'pot-au-feu'), just as the slippers put on before dinner symbolize the complementary male role ...

Tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty; and on the categories it uses to evaluate these effects, some of which may be important for one class and ignored by another, and which the different classes may rank in very different ways. Thus, whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, and tend to go for products that are both cheap and nutritious, the professions prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and not fattening. Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, helps to shape the class

body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in the seemingly most natural features of the body, the dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e. a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus.<sup>2</sup> It is in fact through preferences with regard to food which may be perpetuated beyond their social conditions of production (as, in other areas, an accent, a walk etc.), and also, of course, through the uses of the body in work and leisure which are bound up with them, that the class distribution of bodily properties is determined ...

And the practical philosophy of the male body as a sort of power, big and strong, with enormous, imperative, brutal needs, which is asserted in every male posture, especially when eating, is also the principle of the division of foods between the sexes, a division which both sexes recognize in their practices and their language. It behoves a man to drink and eat more, and to eat and drink stronger things. Thus, men will have two rounds of aperitifs (more on special occasions), big ones in big glasses (the success of Ricard or Pernod is no doubt partly due to its being a drink both strong and copious – not a dainty 'thimbleful'), and they leave the titbits (savoury biscuits, peanuts) to the children and the women, who have a small measure (not enough to 'get tipsy') of homemade aperitif (for which they swap recipes). Similarly, among the hors d'oeuvres, the *charcuterie* is more for the men, and later the cheese, especially if it is strong, whereas the *crudités* (raw vegetables) are more for the women, like the salad; and these affinities are marked by taking a second helping or sharing what is left over. Meat, the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for the men, who take a second helping, whereas the women are satisfied with a small portion. It is not that they are stinting themselves; they really don't want what others might need, especially the men, the natural meat-eaters, and they derive a sort of authority from what they do not see as a privation. Besides, they don't have a taste for men's food, which is reputed to be harmful when eaten to excess (for example, a surfeit of meat can 'turn the blood', overexcite, bring you out in spots etc.) and may even arouse a sort of disgust.

Strictly biological differences are underlined and symbolically accentuated by differences in bearing, differences in gesture, posture and behaviour which express a whole relationship to the social world. To these are added all the deliberate modifications of appearance, especially by use of the set of marks – cosmetic (hairstyle, make-up, beard, moustache, whiskers etc.) or vestimentary – which, because they depend on the economic and cultural

means that can be invested in them, function as social markers deriving their meaning and value from their position in the system of distinctive signs which they constitute and which is itself homologous with the system of social positions. The sign-bearing, sign-wearing body is also a producer of signs which are physically marked by the relationship to the body ... The signs constituting the perceived body, cultural products which differentiate groups by their degree of culture, that is, their distance from nature, seem grounded in nature. The legitimate use of the body is spontaneously perceived as an index of moral uprightness, so that its opposite, a 'natural' body, is seen as an index of *laissez-aller* ('letting oneself go'), a culpable surrender to facility.

Thus one can begin to map out a universe of class bodies, which (biological accidents apart) tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure. It is no accident that bodily properties are perceived through social systems of classification which are not independent of the distribution of these properties among the social classes. The prevailing taxonomies tend to rank and contrast the properties most frequent among the dominant (i.e. the rarest ones) and those most frequent among the dominated. The social representation of his own body which each agent has to reckon with, from the very beginning, in order to build up his subjective image of his body, ... is thus obtained by applying a social system of classification based on the same principle as the social products to which it is applied. Thus, bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners in the distribution of the other fundamental properties – but for the fact that the logic of social heredity sometimes endows those least endowed in all other respects with the rarest bodily properties, such as beauty (sometimes 'fatally' attractive, because it threatens the other hierarchies) and, conversely, sometimes denies the 'high and mighty' the bodily attributes of their position, such as height or beauty.

It is clear that tastes in food cannot be considered in complete independence of the other dimensions of the relationship to the world, to others and to one's own body, through which the practical philosophy of each class is enacted. To demonstrate this, one would have to make a systematic comparison of the working-class and bourgeois ways of treating food, of serving, presenting and offering it, which are infinitely more revelatory than even the nature of the products involved (especially since most surveys of consumption ignore differences in quality). The analysis is a difficult one, because each lifestyle can only really be constructed in relation to the other, which is its objective and subjective negation, so that the meaning of behaviour is totally reversed depending on which point of view is adopted and on whether the common words which have to be used to name the conduct (e.g. 'manners') are invested with popular or bourgeois connotations ...

In opposition to the free-and-easy working-class meal, the bourgeoisie is concerned to eat with all due form. Form is first of all a matter of rhythm, which implies expectations, pauses, restraints; waiting until the last person served has started to eat, taking modest helpings, not appearing over-eager. A strict sequence is observed and all coexistence of dishes which the sequence separates, fish and meat, cheese and dessert, is excluded: for example, before the dessert is served, everything left on the table, even the salt cellar, is removed, and the crumbs are swept up. This extension of rigorous rules into everyday life ... is the expression of a habitus of order, restraint and propriety which may not be abdicated. The relation to food – the primary need and pleasure – is only one dimension of the bourgeois relation to the social world. The opposition between the immediate and the deferred, the easy and the difficult, substance (or function) and form, which is exposed in a particularly striking fashion in bourgeois ways of eating, is the basis of all aestheticization of practice and every aesthetic. Through all the forms and formalisms imposed on the immediate appetite, what is demanded – and inculcated – is not only a disposition to discipline food consumption by a conventional structuring which is also a gentle, indirect, invisible censorship (quite different from enforced privations) and which is an element in an art of living (correct eating, for example, is a way of paying homage to one's hosts and to the mistress of the house, a tribute to her care and effort). It is also a whole relationship to animal nature, to primary needs and the populace who indulge them without restraint; it is a way of denying the meaning and primary function of consumption, which are essentially common, by making the meal a social ceremony, an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement. The manner of presenting and consuming the food, the organization of the meal and setting of the places, strictly differentiated according to the sequence of dishes and arranged to please the eye, the presentation of the dishes, considered as much in terms of shape and colour (like works of art) as of their consumable substance, the etiquette governing posture and gesture, ways of serving oneself and others, of using the different utensils, the seating plan, strictly but discreetly hierarchical, the censorship of all bodily manifestations of the act or pleasure of eating (such as noise or haste), the very refinement of the things consumed, with quality more important than quantity – this whole commitment to stylization tends to shift the emphasis from substance and function to form and manner, and so to deny the crudely material reality of the act of eating and of the things consumed, or, which amounts to the same thing, the basely material vulgarity of those who indulge in the immediate satisfactions of food and drink.

Given the basic opposition between form and substance, one could re-generate each of the oppositions between the two antagonistic approaches to the treatment of food and the act of eating. In one case, food is claimed as a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and gives strength (hence the emphasis on heavy, fatty, strong foods, of which

the paradigm is pork – fatty and salty – the antithesis of fish – light, lean and bland); in the other, the priority given to form (the shape of the body, for example) and social form, formality, puts the pursuit of strength and substance in the background and identifies true freedom with the elective asceticism of a self-imposed rule. And it could be shown that two antagonistic world views, two worlds, two representations of human excellence are contained in this matrix. Substance – or matter – is what is substantial, not only ‘filling’ but also real, as opposed to all appearances, all the fine words and empty gestures that ‘butter no parsnips’ and are, as the phrase goes, purely symbolic; reality, as against sham, imitation, window-dressing; the little eating-house with its marble-topped tables and paper napkins where you get an honest square meal and aren’t ‘paying for the wallpaper’ as in fancy restaurants; being, as against seeming, nature and the natural, simplicity (pot-luck, ‘take it as it comes’, ‘no standing on ceremony’), as against embarrassment, mincing and posturing, airs and graces, which are always suspected of being a substitute for substance, i.e. for sincerity, for feeling, for what is felt and proved in actions; it is the free-speech and language of the heart which make the true ‘nice guy’ blunt, straightforward, unbending, honest, genuine, ‘straight down the line’ and ‘straight as a die’, as opposed to everything that is pure form, done only for form’s sake; it is freedom and the refusal of complications, as opposed to respect for all the forms and formalities spontaneously perceived as instruments of distinction and power. On these moralities, these world views, there is no neutral viewpoint; what for some is shameless and slovenly, for others is straightforward, unpretentious; familiarity is for some the most absolute form of recognition, the abdication of all distance, a trusting openness, a relation of equal to equal; for others, who shun familiarity, it is an unseemly liberty.

## Notes

1. ‘Bourgeois’ is used here as shorthand for ‘dominant fractions of the dominant class’, and ‘intellectual’ or ‘artist’ functions in the same way for ‘dominant fractions of the dominant class’.
2. Bourdieu uses ‘habitus’ to designate the network of practices and social frameworks that structure class position and lifestyle. – *Ed.*

# 7

## Colonial Creoles

### The Formation of Tastes in Early America

*Donna R. Gabaccia*

Beginning with the founding of St. Augustine [Florida], three expanding European empires—centered in France, England, and Spain—pushed their way from opposing directions into the territories already inhabited by approximately four million natives on the continent of North America. A fourth empire, the Dutch, took up temporary residence along the Hudson River. Dutch and English traders in turn transported ten million West Africans to the Americas over the next two hundred years, selling most of them into slavery. All of these groups had developed traditions of eating that marked them as culturally different, one from the other. All, on the other hand, had a recent history of selectively adapting new foods even before they confronted one another on North American soil.

As eaters deeply familiar with their natural environments, Native Americans enjoyed tremendous advantages in the culinary exchanges of the colonial period: centuries of adaptation to a variety of natural environments in North America had already shaped their foodways. If any group involved in the Columbian exchanges might have held firmly to tradition, it was Native Americans, with their vast knowledge of their own land and climate.

In most places in North America, native survival had depended on the successful cultivation of the “three sisters”: corn, beans, and squashes. Of these, corn and squashes, including the pumpkin, seemed most distinctively American to newer arrivals, since they were unknown in Europe. Corn is a remarkable grain: it has been called “a machine of marvelous efficiency,” so bountifully does the plant produce digestible calories from even small tracts of land, and under a wide range of ecological conditions (Weatherwax 1954: 84). From Mexico’s central valley, corn had spread as far as the eastern woodlands but had faltered in the arid highlands of northern New Mexico

conjoiner) of some sort. He most often influences the gastrosemantics of the rest of the society in a distinct way. Householders routinely look up to him for guidance. In sickness they go to him for cures and healing; in everyday life, they approach him as a guru...

We focus on Hindu interrelationships between food, self, and the ultimate reality by two crucial cultural formulations: First, "You eat what you are," and second, "You are what you eat." These are integral to the Hindu's authoritative tradition. The first is well grounded in the *Gita* (XVII, 7-10), where foods are classified according to the three "strands" or dispositions that humans betray.<sup>2</sup> The second formulation bases itself on the Upanishadic instruction—pure nourishment leads to pure mind or nature (see Hume 1985: 262). As a corollary, therefore, a healthy body is considered to be a byproduct of discriminating and controlled nourishment. Diseases follow from flaws—moral, mental, and physical. Holy persons rigorously control these and produce examples for the householders to follow...

### "Speaking Food" of the Holy: Three Contexts and Expressions

The Hindu holy person handles food to serve clearly designated moral and spiritual purposes, including efforts to alleviate human sorrow and suffering and to bring one nearer to liberation. Renouncers and sadhus do not view food as a commodity. They do not trade in foods to earn profit, and they neither hoard nor covet. They similarly should not cultivate their palate. Put another way, a holy person must regulate and control food only to cultivate his or her spiritual power. He masters his desires and senses by fasting and minimal eating. With increasing self-control and austerities, his sight and touch make food express special powers and messages. Detached from food, as we will see below, he makes food "speak" and "act" on his behalf. His food conveys his blessings and curses. As blessing, his food heals, uplifts, and brings good fortune to the faithful. As leftovers, his food guides disciples toward spiritual experiences and divine imminence (Babb 1987).

#### *Food for Sustaining Life*

Within the Hindu world, food is necessary to remain healthy and stay alive. Food is viewed as the source of all strength in the Upanishads:

[Sanatkumara said:] Food is, verily, greater than strength. Therefore if a man abstains from food for ten days, even though he might live, yet he would not be able to see, hear, reflect, become convinced, act, and enjoy the result. But when he obtains food, he is able to see, hear, reflect, become convinced, act, and enjoy the result.

(*Chandogya Upanishad* VII, ix, 1; see Nikhilananda 1963, 341)

# 14

## Food with Saints

R. S. Khare

### The Cultural Language of Food

India provides us with virtually an inexhaustible repository of instances where food loads itself with mundane and profound meanings. The subject is so central to the culture that we have called it gastrosemantics, to refer to its unusual powers of multiple symbolization and communication via food.<sup>1</sup> Embedded within his quest for self-identity and ultimate reality, the Hindu's food "loads" and "unloads" meanings and messages as it passes through diverse domains of existence—physical, human, and divine. We will consider in this paper how food conveys a range of meanings and experiences that conjoin the worldly to the otherworldly, and the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. The Hindu world rather demands that its food "speak" a language that conjoins the gross and the subtle, body and spirit, the seen and the unseen, outside and inside, and the particular and the general.

The Hindu food meets this goal by representing extensive interrelationships between the three corners of the gastrosemantic triangle—"self," food, and body (including the societal; for the Hindu's "self" see Bharati 1985), and by becoming a principle of the eternal moral order (dharma) and cycles of creation. Food becomes a reflexive medium for conceiving and experiencing interpenetrations of food, mind, and breath, most often by the yogic control of one's body and what one eats. In anthropological terms, food becomes a powerful, polyvocal interlocutor between matter and spirit, and body and self. Such a "language" transforms according to one's life-stage and the path of spiritual pursuit. But whether it is a householder, a saint, or a renouncer, food, body, self, and personhood remain guided by some universal principles, and these hold key to a proper understanding of food to the issues of ontology and ultimate reality. In the following discussion, I shall emphasize the food of the Hindu holy person, always a yogi (i.e. a



sadhus in Lucknow were adept even in the "science of pulse and humors" most depended on their "spiritual" powers. The general principles governing their healing were that (a) only disciplined daily eating and living ensured health and longevity; (b) healing foods required firm resolve and faith; and (c) such foods should adjust with a patient's age, gender, and karmic condition (for food, disease, and karma, see Khare 1976).

However, for the Hindu, a holy person's healing foods or prescriptions can seldom be equated to that of a doctor's. Only the first one infuses (intentionally or unintentionally) his spiritual powers into whatever he prescribes. Devoid of any motive of economic profit or fame, and impelled by service to the needy and suffering, the holy person is the ideal healer. He ideally practices desireless action (*niskama karma*). But one only rarely comes across such a healer. He appears only by the divine will. He heals both the body and the soul of a person. Whatever he gives, whether flowers, herbs, roots, fruits, or elaborately cooked foods, it heals as no other medicine can. Even the dying are brought back to life (i.e. when the physicians have given up).

No wonder therefore that major Ayurvedic doctors in India are also found practicing selfless austerities and devotion. Prabhu Datta Brahmachari (1977: 19-20) mentions cases of *vaidyas* who treated not only free of charge but also refused to eat or drink water at the patient's house during such visits (even if they were of the appropriate caste status). In popular thought, rigorous self-discipline in diet and austere lifestyle considerably enhances the efficacy of an Ayurvedic doctor.

Thus a holy person acts like a "doctor," and a doctor like a holy person. To paraphrase Brahmachari (18), a sadhu writing as a "doctor," Ayurveda's responsibility does not end with curing the body. Its goal is actually liberation (*moksa*). Its attention is not on the body but on one's soul (*atman*). Body is after all ephemeral; it is destructible. One desires "diseaselessness" or health (*arogyata*) because it enables one to progress toward liberation.

The issue is mentioned thus by a doctor in the same book: "Ayurveda came about because of this sage tradition [of compassion toward those suffering]. So many times ancient sages have promoted Ayurveda... Whenever sages, seeing human misery, have been overcome with compassion, then, they have organized a significant new phase for augmenting and completing the [science of] Ayurveda" (Brahmachari 1977: 8; my interpolations).

### *Super-Foods with Sadhus, Yogis and Devotees*

Since a genuine sadhu or renouncer views food in the context of faith, austerity, and devotion, he sees what eludes the ordinary. To him food is what self is—in the "seen" (gross) as well as "unseen" (subtle) dimensions. His austerities (*tapas*) empower self, and his self, the food. He blesses his devotees by accepting devotees' offerings and by returning them as his leftovers. Though milk preparations, sweets, and flowers are most often so exchanged, special

One is enjoined to stay alive, in extremity, by eating forbidden or abominable foods. Today's Hindu knows that the sages have done so under *apadadhama* (dharma under distress). Applicable to householders and holy persons alike, such lifesaving pragmatic strategies render food procurement necessary for all—even the staunchest yogi or recluse. There is no provision for death by starvation (in contrast to the Jains). Under normal conditions, all dharmic-upholding persons, householders, and renunciators must regulate their eating (*Gita* VI, 17). They must fast, control their senses, and view food as a cosmic sacrificial process and product (e.g. *Gita*, III, 14).

Though all holy persons must eat, not all "handle food" (as does a householder by storing and cooking), nor must all beg. Yet all Hindus, whether saints or householders, extract special messages and portents from food. But saints especially encode foods with special messages as they go about eating, producing leftovers, and creating "blessed foods" (with sight, touch, giving by hand, or by verbal command; see Babb 1987). They convey equally well by fasting, maintaining silence, or favoring specific fruits and flowers, for granting boons to devotees. Still, not all holy persons may engage in such transactions. Some may "rise above" such a necessity and bless simply by "willing" (literally "flashing on the mind").

Within the Hindu world, one should eat only enough to live. Fasting therefore is a necessary moral underside of eating, and it intensifies one's food-self dialogue. Fasting also emphasizes the dominance of soul over body. Non-eating, like eating, thoroughly affects one's physical, social, psychological, and spiritual states...

### *Saint's Healing Foods*

Hindu holy persons in everyday life freely recommend special diets, herbs, and fasts for treating diseases, undesirable psychological dispositions, and mental tardiness. The enormous banyan tree of the Ayurveda provides them with congenial therapeutic ground, while their learning of healing from gurus and saints equips them with actual skills. As comprehensive healers, they freely dispense healing foods and herbs. Over time, they acquire the dual therapeutic-spiritual authority which even *vaidyas* (or "doctors") cannot dispute.

In principle, the holy person can heal with or without intention. He himself may not fully know the powers he possesses. His spiritual presence and contact are automatically considered beneficial to the body as well as the soul. Such qualities make gurus, sadhus, and saints the "ultimate healers." They cure all the three "fevers" (i.e. of the body, ill-fortune, and evil circumstance). If they are known to cure incurable bodily diseases, they also treat the "disease" of transmigration—*samsara*.

These holy healers respond according to a person's physical condition, age, sex, life-phase, spiritual path, and psychological dispositions. Though some

offerings attract specific meaning and messages. For instance, rice pudding may represent auspiciousness, fertility, and spiritual grace for many. Fruits received from a saint are "read" for hidden messages because foods readily acquire the intrinsic properties (*guna*, *dosa*, and *rasa*) of the transactors and their intentions. Some fruits represent maleness (banana), and others femaleness (orange); some represent astrological planets by color and shape, while others speak about the saint's equalitarianism. Blessed sweets widely connote divine agreeableness, desirable ritual consequences, convergent social goals and concerns, and auspiciousness (Toomey 1986). "Fruits, leaves, and flowers" constitute a devotee's normal food offerings to the divine, within homes and in temples (on different properties of *prasada*, see Khare 1976: 92-110).

Some saints become widely known by the food they eat most, or bless with (e.g. a saint was known as *Payahari* because he drank only milk to subsist; see *Bhaktamala* 1969: 302). A famous *mauni* sadhu (i.e. a saint with vow of silence) in Lucknow was known to bless with sweets and flowers. Known as the flower-bearing saint, he was never seen without these accompaniments. Devotees believed that these appeared miraculously before him during his night worship and contained supernatural powers. His devotees had developed a whole language of interpretation for the sweets and flowers received from him. For example, red flowers meant auspiciousness and progeny, white stood for true knowledge, and yellow for prosperity, family happiness, and personal fame. Flowers and foods were the saint's ubiquitous language of communication, though he complemented it with suitable eye contacts and bodily gestures.

Deities, in turn, essentially authenticate such a gastrosemantic paradigm of communication shared between the divine, saints, and their devotees. Popular devotional literature in different parts of India underscores how deities routinely "speak" through foods (e.g. see such hagiographies as *Bhaktamala* 1969). Major saints often establish the models of (and for) such a total communication. Invariably, within such stories, a deity sides with his devotees when challenged by orthodox Brahmans, priests, or other ritualists. For example, the deity refused the food offerings of the Brahmans to receive the same from the Untouchable saint, Ravidas. He "came in his lap" to eat from him. This model underscores the superiority of love over social status or wealth, and it derives from Krishna's acceptance of leftovers from his devotee (Vidura) over the elaborate feast from a vain king (e.g. Duryodhana).

The deity even sustains a true devotee when the devotee does not (or cannot) feed or protect himself (since he is usually lost in devotion). The deity even cleans and tends him when sick (and then cures the sickness). The divine grace is known to come to those who feed other devotees and who offer them hospitality even at a great personal cost. (Illustrating these properties is the story of Madhava Das Jagannath in *Bhaktamala* 1969: 540-551). With Mira Bai, the famous woman saint of northern India, the deity neutralized poison to prove his commitment to devotees.

Faith, devotion, otherworldly aestheticism, and saintly compassion thus charge the saint's food with special powers and messages. The contemporary religious culture widely recognizes this devotion-induced transformation of food. For example:

One time he [Raghunath Gosain, a Caitanyaite saint] became indisposed and worshiped his deity [Lord Jagan Nath] mentally, feeding him with rice and milk. He ate the same afterward as offering. Its essence (*rasa*) pervaded his mortal body [just as the actual preparation would]. When a Vaidya practitioner felt his pulse [to treat his disease], he declared that the saint had just eaten rice and milk. O! gentlemen [says the commentator], how much more could I emphasize that you understand it all yourself.

(*Bhaktamala* 1969: 553; my translation and interpolation)

The devotional literature abounds with such examples... Since the deity remains at the beck and call of a genuine devotee to this extent, the devotees rigorously control their desire for food.

Simultaneously, once he has become spiritually accomplished (a *siddha*), a saint's speech is instantaneously realized. Whatever such a saint says or desires, occurs, especially for others' welfare. For such saints, speech and action, and thought and food become coextensive. It is a good example of Hindu's idea of gastrosematicity. Thus, "As a devotee was mentally offering buttermilk to the deity, a disciple touched the saint's feet and startled him, and in the lap of the devotee spilled the actual buttermilk [for everybody to see]." (This case was related to me by an informant-Bhakta in Lucknow during 1986.)

A climax of such deity and devotee intimacies occurs when the two share their saliva via food. For instance,

[Once Vallabhacarya] had the milk *prasada* given to [saint] Paramanandadasa in order to find out whether or not Krishna [the deity] found the milk-offering well prepared and rich in flavor. Since [the deity] is passionately fond of milk, giving milk as *prasada* to a Vaisnava [devotee], who had received [the deity's] favor, is just like giving him the ecstasy (*rasa*) of union with the [deity] in the [divine sport]. If the [devotee] praises the taste of the milk *prasada*, then it may be taken as certain that [the deity] is indicating, through that [devotee], that he enjoyed the milk.

The interpretive account of the episode continues:

Since Paramanandadasa drank some of the saliva from [the deity's] lips along with the milk, he plunged into experience of the *rasa* [love-permeated, selfless devotion] of all of the nocturnal [divine] sports.

(From the *Vartas*, on Paramanandadasa; see Barz 1976:156-7)

For the devotional and popular Hindu culture, these are examples of gastrosemantics par excellence. The divine-tasted milk *prasāda* in the above example transports the devotee into a direct and powerful spiritual experience. For Paramadada, such an experience is beyond all the conceivable materiality or symbolism of foods; it represents the most exalted divine intimacy. At this level, food, deity and self become coextensive, collapsing our two opening formulations—"you are what you eat" and "you eat what you are"—into one supreme divine essence and experience.

### Experience and Expressions

Not only do such examples produce a commentary on the dichotomous "opposites" (i.e. the *dvandva* as represented by matter and spirit, food and mind, and self and the other), but they also illustrate some general properties of the Hindu cultural logic. The Hindu's food pursues a nondichotomous logic and language suitable to convey the unity of expression and experience. Food to him is one of the most versatile interlocutors, and his saints and the divine elaborate, enrich, magnify, and empower it to transcend normal channels of signification and communication. Relying on more than ordinary logic, such Hindu food, like other crucial principles (dharma, karma, *atman*, etc.), expresses itself most where faith, practice, suggestion, experience, and intuition converge.

Let us now return to our opening allusion to the Hindu's gastrosemantic triangle (food-self-body). With "self" (referring to *jiva* and its "I-ness" but culminating in the realization of Atman) at the apex, food and body must cater to self's purposes and priorities. Given this Hindu view, the basic source of all gastrosemantics must also come from self and its journey within the creation. But such a triangle, by definition, is *multiform* (i.e. it is capable of transformation, and it produces varying signification by cultural context and purpose). It is manipulable. Thus, once we juxtapose this triangle to our general analytic triangle (i.e. food-language-self or food-discourse-self), we may see how the two interrelate, especially since the Hindu system treats language and discourse as a function of self (and its *manas*), while this "mind" depends on food and breath. The food thus also becomes the basis for breath and mind, underscoring an interplay between gross and subtle constitutive elements. Similarly applicable to food is the triangle of the three basic "qualities" or constituents of nature (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*). In life, such triangular "qualities" swirl within oneself and outside, attracting an interplay of food with innate strands, flaws, moods, aesthetics, and attachments. Whether one is a renouncer, a householder, or a woman, these triangles remain the generating source for food's multiple meanings and "voices" within the Hindu universe.

We may decode the food-breath-mind triangle a little further to emphasize the point that the Hindu cosmological constituents stand squarely behind the

food. For example, breath (*prana*) via food yields the *buddhi* (intellect), which, in turn, works in terms of five sensory organs, five organs of action, five subtle elements, and five gross elements (for a summary discussion and schematic representation of such cosmological constituents, see Satprakashananda 1965: 314). However, all of this conceptual and semantic complexity translates into a simple, direct, and forceful principle: One should practice self-control via austerities to control the swirl of preceding triangular constituents of the world (*trigunatmaka samsara*). And only a genuine relationship between the divine and devotee, guru and disciple, and learned texts and practice ensures such a goal, where food becomes a crucial link between finite (body) and the infinite (soul). Food and body become soul's sheaths, and not the other way round. Yogis, sadhus, renouncers, and gurus (even sagely householders) in India continuously try to "realize" this truth. They remind themselves that only their bodies are perishable; they are not. Since the *atman* alone is real, it is considered capable of creating bodies (and the foods it needs). As Ramakrishna Paramahansa said, even food cooking conveys them a message: "As potato and brinjal when *siddha*, i.e. when boiled properly, become soft and pulpy; so a man when he becomes *siddha*, i.e. reaches perfection, is seen to be all humility and tenderness" (see Abhedananda 1946: 74).

But the devotional movement, where the deity takes over the devotee's life and his senses, complicates the above austere picture. Both food and body are divinized, and they return center stage with a divine-inspired substantivity and aesthetics. As our devout saints illustrated, they employ creative expressions to convey how a devotee "tastes" the divine name, and "eats" and "drinks" the divine praise by his ears. All senses thus immerse themselves in the divine's presence, making the double entendre a standard fare of devotional expressions... The following, again the master stroke of a saint, employs a battery of such switches which lights up the relationship between self (a part) and the divine (the whole), morality and aesthetics, and expression and experience.

For the milk-made delicacy of Rama's Name, the sugar is Krishna's Name, and the Name of the Lord Vitthala, the ghee; mix, put it into your mouth and see the taste! Take the wheat of Ego, put it into the milk of dispassion and pound it into soft flour and prepare it into fine vermicelli, boil it, and put it into the vessel of your heart, fill it with water of feeling and cook it with your intellect; take it on a plate and eat; and when you get a belching, think of the Lord Purandara Vitthala, who is of the form of joy.

(Purandaradasa (1480-1564) quoted in V. Raghavan 1966: 128-129)

With such expressions, joyous and blissful relationships between food and self, food and deity, and self and deity redraw the nondualist ideal with a definite purpose. Here emotion, intimacy, experience, and insight become the lifeblood of the Hindu's being and becoming (compare "ethnociological"

accounts; see Marriott 1976, 1989). We also experience a corresponding metamorphosis in the "substance" of body and self, self and food, and self and cosmos...

### Foods with Saints

Now we can make some general comments on the gastrosemantics of the holy food. The pervasive unifying logic of the Hindu food derives from the nature of the Hindu's cosmology. The Creator of the Hindu universe is a yogi, a conjoiner. Like him, food's cosmic place and meanings are therefore held self-evident and indisputable; they are found one with the rest of the cosmic moral order (for basic pronouncements in the Upanishads, see Hume 1985: 153, 284, 290). In practice, the food-body-self and self-dharma-cosmos paradigms work together to reveal the vast meaningful range within which the holy person places foods. The ascetic, orthodox or not, constantly approaches foods and food exchanges to proclaim and maintain his self-identity and to conjoin by yoga one's various bodily and spiritual states. To holy persons more than householders, foods constitute a comprehensive yet delicate and subtle language, marked with a wide array of cosmic, social, emotional, karmic, and spiritual messages. Foods ... produce indirect (as in meditation or dreams) as well as direct (as by health or sickness) consequences for the yogi...

A yogi's food rests with the classical Upanishadic notion of food as one of the soul's "five sheaths" (food, breath, mind, intellect, and bliss). Though constituting the outermost sheath, food successively transforms itself into the innermost (and the subtlest) experience—spiritual bliss. Each succeeding subtler sheath represents to the yogi a transformation and transcendence of the one before. He "experiences" how the moral food substance changes into the rarefied breath, the breath into mind, the mind into (still rarer) intellect, and the last into bliss (*ananda*).

[Many Hindi and Sanskrit expressions have been omitted from this abridged text.]

### Notes

1. Gastrosemantics may be generally defined as a culture's distinct capacity to signify, experience, systematize, philosophize, and communicate with food and food practices by pressing appropriate linguistic and cultural devices to render food as a central subject of attention. To refer to the cultural depth and density of meanings foods invoke, I will employ "gastrosemanticty."

2. All references to the *Gita* in the chapter are to R. C. Zaehner's 1969 translation and annotation of this classical text. However, sometimes in my text, I have purposely retained some popularly conveyed senses and interpretations from my field discussions, conveying to the reader an idea of how today's Hindus widely regard the *Gita* a living—life-guiding—text.

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