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## In Tastes, Lost and Found: Remembering the Real Flavor of Fat Pork

Brad Weiss

College of William and Mary, blweis@wm.edu

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*Edited by*  
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and Alison Leitch**

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## 2 IN TASTES, LOST AND FOUND

# Remembering the Real Flavor of Fat Pork

*Brad Weiss*

In the late 1980s the U.S.-based National Pork Producers Council inaugurated its campaign to promote pork as “The Other White Meat.” What is this “other” white meat? Why is it “white”? What are its material qualities? And what might “white meat” that is also pork taste like? One way we might think of this American campaign is that it is designed to make pork appealing *not* on the basis of its taste but for other valued qualities: its lightness, simplicity, healthfulness, or convenience. Pork is extolled, in fact, as a ready analogue to the ubiquitous chicken breast.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this campaign also invokes the materiality of pork in very specific ways. The whiteness of this other meat not only promotes an association with chicken breasts but further depends on the physical and biological remaking of pork and pigs. For in order to turn pork into white meat, pigs must be raised to be long and lean, with as little fat as possible in their high-priced tender loins, the cut most often marketed as white.

This well-known advertising campaign encapsulates many of the themes addressed in this chapter. To begin with, the ambiguous materiality of fat is, in many ways, the very object of the Pork Council’s advertising. As the council itself puts it, “The goal of the campaign was to increase consumer demand for pork and to dispel pork’s reputation as a fatty protein” (National Pork Council 2012). This attempt to recast pork as white focuses on this persistent conception of pork as something problematic and locates that problem in pork’s fattiness. Moreover, this concern with the reputation of a protein, and the attempt to address this problem by reclassifying pork as white, using descriptive terms reserved (in the American lexicon) for poultry, suggests that fat is not simply a physiological feature of pigs and their (un)desirable meat but is also a socially and culturally symbolic form.

In this chapter I consider fat as a symbolic form, and I focus, in particular, on the ways that the *taste* of pork fat conveys or carries sociocultural significance. I also ask, “How might we describe the materiality of taste?” Taste, in both its prescriptive and descriptive versions, is often assessed as primarily a discursive form. There are all sorts of ways that taste can be understood as a representation, a commentary, or a moralized point of reference for securing the bonds of commensality or demonstrating potent sources of social distinction. In many critical assessments “taste,” as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, “invites philosophical interest” (1999: 144) when it is situated within what she calls “narratives of eating.” Such approaches to taste (e.g., Appadurai 1981; Bourdieu 1984; Korsmeyer 1999; Robertson Smith 1972 [1887]; and Stoller 1989; to name but a few) raise a host of compelling questions and have cast remarkable light on the significance of food as a sociocultural form. But at a perceptual level, taste has its own specific qualities that are not just narratable or referential but felt. And it is these felt qualities within lived experience that merit even closer consideration. Such a consideration of pork fat as a symbolic material form with sensible and sensuous properties leads me to understand this substance in terms of the qualisigns it exhibits. Charles S. Peirce’s (1955) discussion of qualisigns has received a good deal of attention in certain anthropological quarters (Fehérváry 2009; Keane 2003; Meneley 2008; Munn 1986), as a way of bridging the divide between the conceptual and material dimensions of signifying practices. Qualities, in Peirce’s terms, are primary experiences, feelings, or immediate sensory characteristics (e.g., whiteness, redness, heaviness, lightness). These properties have the potential to convey significance and so to serve as qualisigns across the different material forms in which similar qualities are embodied. Thus, the fattiness of pork has the potential to suggest, for example, unctuousness of character, smugness, and immoderation but also humility, sincerity, and modesty. How these various qualisigns convey any of these actual meanings is an open question that can be determined only within concrete contexts of practice and discourse (Keane 2003: 419).

Critical attention to fat in these terms is warranted, in part, because the felt qualities of taste so frequently motivate people to pursue particular foods and, in pursuit of them, to engage in a whole host of social projects. And yet the question remains very much open: What *is* taste, and how do we recognize those distinctive qualities that make it a discernible phenomenon that is not simply reducible or equivalent to the discursive meanings of consumption, dining, or cuisine? While taste is, undoubtedly, a dimension of each of these, the vocabulary that we need to describe taste itself,<sup>2</sup> and the perceptual qualities particular to it, deserve further inquiry.

Considering the taste of pork fat and fatty pork, I argue that the taste of such fat is critical to understanding different registers of value that are available when eating pork. The taste of fat is occasionally proffered as a distinctly different “basic taste” worthy of the same primacy of importance as salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and the “fifth

taste,” *umami*. I will address these claims in my discussion of contemporary meat science. But my primary focus, even in consideration of these scientific assessments, is on the ways that they reveal how the taste of pork fat has certain phenomenological as well as political economic qualities. These qualities can be discerned when we look more concretely at contemporary social movements in the United States that are attempting to transform the way that pork is produced and brought to the public and are working to advance alternative models of meat production—embraced as simultaneously “new” and “old-fashioned” methods of animal husbandry. These alternative models, and the kinds of pigs they promote, often privilege the taste of fat as a critical feature of that innovative social and cultural practice. Taste is framed in these efforts as a matter both gustatory and political, and a more nuanced appreciation of what taste is might, then, reveal matters of broad relevance to contemporary social practice.

## A SENSE OF MEMORY: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO TASTE

Within the Western sensorium, we might note that taste presents a paradox. At once evanescent and palpable, taste can elicit nostalgic reminiscence of bygone pasts, at the same time that it seems to be really available to us only when we have tactile contact with some material form. Seeing is believing; a touchstone, something we can get our hands on, confirms the concrete presence of the world; and the aromatic stimulates the erotic. The place of taste (to turn *terroir* on its ear) in this array of associations, its slot in the taxonomy of senses, is its complex evocation of memory. In the course of this chapter I inquire into what taste is, or can be, and how we can know it, or at least make shared, meaningful claims about it. Evocation, recollection, and nostalgia are the canonical modes of remembrance allied to eating. More specifically, in asking about the relationship between taste and memory, I am interested in the various ways that gustation can formulate relations between the past, present, and future. In keeping with Karl Marx’s enigmatic assertion that “The *forming* of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (1988: 109), I explore the historical possibilities of gustatory tastes by examining a particular taste’s history.

The evocative character of taste has been noted often in the anthropological literature. David Sutton’s (2001) celebrated account of alimentary practice in the Aegean offers a cogent theoretical and ethnographic illustration of a Proustian anthropology’s efforts to capture cuisine’s ability to formulate and incite recollection, commemoration, and nostalgia. In his recent review of the literature, Jon Holtzman (2009) demonstrates that memory is often the implicit subtext of ethnographic examinations of food and that considerations of such memory-constructing processes



as commodification, urbanization, and ethnogenesis often fix on things culinary as apt illustrations of social transformation. He also makes the provocative point that the sensuous interconnection of cuisine and remembrance is often *celebrated* as a sensuous mode of fond recollections, a sensuousness that overlooks the ways that meals, both bitter and insipid, can recall hardship, illness, and—of course—hunger.

Nadia Seremetakis's notable invocation of the peach variety known as "the breast of Aphrodite" offers a well-known illustration of the characteristic mode of capturing memory through taste (and the senses more generally). Her work highlights "the complicity of history and the senses" (1994: 4). But what is truly critical in Seremetakis's work is less a concern with what that peach *tastes* like ("a bit sour and a bit sweet, it exuded a distinct fragrance"; this is the sum of her description of this peach's taste [Seremetakis 1994: 1]) than an interest in contemporary Greek nostalgia for "the peach," which is no longer grown, it seems, anywhere in Greece. The peach itself is not recognized for its (perhaps indescribable) taste; the peach's *absence* is what is remarkable about it. "The absent peach became narrative" (2). The absence of the peach then becomes a way of recalling, and therefore of remembering, history. Its taste remains strangely inaccessible.

Judith Farquhar's (2002) magisterial account of post-Maoist banquets in China describes opulent feasts in which newly wealthy businessmen and bureaucrats indulge in newfangled appetites in highly poetic ways. In one instance, amid the dishes of three-in-one duck, artfully carved root vegetables, and barrels of white liquor that grace any banquet, are an assortment of mossy plants with fried and roasted insects—the very foods of hunger that barely sustained these very same eaters during the depths of the Cultural Revolution (Farquhar 2002: 134). Here Farquhar shows the complexities of memory in relation to shifting ethical demands in a society where it has become "glorious to get rich," as contemporary Chinese subjects keep alive their recollections of collective immiseration by transforming them into modes of exquisite refinement and, of course, distinction.

These anthropological assessments are valuable touchstones for exploring the taste of fat and its connections to history and memory in this chapter. In the specific history that I discuss here, there is, as we'll see, a discourse of tastes that are "lost" and so subject to being "found," revitalized, and reproduced in the present. What intrigues me most about this formulation is that, like Farquhar's exquisite banquets, these ways of grasping tastes do not merely register the passage of time but posit its trajectory; they comprehend a past from which the present has not just emerged but deviated, even declined. Such taste claims, then, are ways of evaluating temporality, and—insofar as values induce strong feelings, motivate subjects, and compel action—attention to these culinary claims might allow us to understand taste as a means of making history.

## TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TASTE

It is interesting to note, in respect to these questions, a kind of paradox in Aristotle's hierarchy of the senses. For if taste is a quintessential "proximal sense" that can only encounter and confirm its object in the intimate interiors of the body (which makes it less noble and more bestial in Aristotle's view), our *accounts* of taste characteristically make reference to locations distant in place and time. This is as true for the Classical tastes of foods whose concrete qualities are grounded in the humoral stuff of the universe itself (Shapin 2010), as it is for contemporary claims about the bacterial profiles of cheeses and their molecular counterparts in grassy hillsides and thistled pastures. The Tanzanians I've eaten with routinely describe the tastes of stewed plantains as heavy, satisfying, and wet, like a farm replete with vegetation, and the cassava porridge they consume only in the absence of plantains as dry and pallid, like the exposed grassland where it grows. A food of hunger, then, tastes like the social condition itself. Indeed, the general amenability of taste to connote potent memories and, as I'll suggest, to call forth others suggests that taste's proximity belies its eminently social character. Again, the evaluative efforts of food artisans of all stripes puts food into the making of history, recuperating what's been lost and calling forth new ways of tasting

To ask the question again: What *is* taste (to say nothing of the taste of tasty pork)? Is our ability to attribute a *temporal* character to tastes, such as the nostalgia or commemoration regularly invoked in anthropological accounts of taste, akin to the temporality of other modes of perception—as when we offer a new vision for the future or capture the ancient tones of a musical genre? My premise, which stems from my phenomenological predilections, is that taste is not just a sensation, the product of a stimulus formulated by various flavor precursors targeted to human receptors, but rather a mode of perception, and so a form of being in the world. Taste is simultaneously part of who we are, in body and mind, and the world we inhabit, both an opening to and embedding in reality for us. It is, then, a way of both making and acting on existence, a way of inhabiting the world.

Consider a comprehensive review essay entitled "The Taste of Fat." It offers a summary of how meat scientists characteristically understand taste, or "gustatory mechanisms":

Gustation (informally often referred to as "taste" or "flavor perception") is a form of direct chemoreception in the taste bud that is bathed in saliva. The taste bud is composed of sensory taste cells surrounding a central pore, and has several layers of support cells on the outer region of the taste bud. . . . The superior

laryngeal branch of the vagus nerve innervates the epiglottis and larynx and the posterior one-third of the tongue. Different sensory signals from ortho-nasal, retro-nasal odour and gustatory receptors may integrate in the higher centers to give “flavor” cognition. (Dransfield 2008: 38)

Evaluation of the taste of fat, so critical to meat flavor, requires attention to this chemoreceptive process, the coordination of lipid-derived volatile compounds, saliva, sensory cells, and neural innovation. But note as well that this same paper begins with the observation that the perception of fat, and therefore of meat quality, is not entirely comprehended by these mechanisms:

The evaluation of fat by the consumer comprises elements of the fat itself (its amount and quality), as well as the consumer’s sensory capacities, cultural background and concerns about environmental and ethical considerations in meat production. (Dransfield 2008: 37)

This characteristic object-subject (and, we might add, nature-culture) divide has provided a methodological agenda for meat scientists in the field, as a spate of recent studies propose to study the difference in the taste of meat from pasture-raised as opposed to conventionally raised animals. Not surprisingly, given the ties of meat science programs to industrial producers, these studies often attempt to discredit the claim that, for example, grass-fed beef tastes better than grain-fed beef, or to attribute such claims to subjective biases or cultural factors, like the consumer’s country of origin. I have no reason to doubt the validity of physiological claims about chemoreception, or the levels of linoleic acid in consumer-preferred meats, or the role of fatty acid transporter proteins in the mechanics of taste. But it remains an open question as to how these mechanisms are articulated as the *experience* of taste or why, for example, the mere presence of these acids, proteins, and physiological structures should not just register as a flavor sensation but be evaluated as, for example, tasty and rich rather than cloying and heavy. These questions about evaluation and quality, to say nothing of the role of “cultural background and concerns about environmental and ethical considerations in meat production” in consumer preferences, indicate that taste is a feature of how we make our worlds.

Giorgio Agamben offers an apposite and characteristically eccentric discussion of what taste might be through the illustrative example of what taste *isn’t*, in the *Umwelt*, or environment-world, of a tick (2004: 45–47). Here he relies on the ecologist Jakob von Uexküll’s notion of an environment-world, characterized as a welter of what Uexküll calls “carriers of significance,” which form an integrated system of features that correspond to the bodily receptors of the organism that inhabits this world. There is, then, no objective environment with fixed features, or abstract

body with discrete sensory capacities. Rather, Uexküll describes the correspondence between “carriers of significance” and bodily reception as a musical unity, “like two notes ‘of the keyboard on which nature performs the supratemporal and extraspatial symphony of signification’” (Agamben 2004: 41).

And what of the tick? The tick, says Uexküll, has an Umwelt with three carriers of significance: (1) the smell of mammalian sweat that attracts it, (2) the hairy surface of the mammalian body to which it clings, and (3) the temperature of 37 degrees Celsius, which corresponds to the blood of mammals. The life of a tick is united to these three elements; indeed, says Agamben, the tick *is* the relationship among these elements. And it is no casual observation to note that what is not present as a carrier of significance in the Umwelt of the tick is the *taste* of blood. Indeed, Uexküll observes that the tick can carry out the fullness of its existence without benefit of the taste of blood, for ticks will attach themselves to any suitable surface and absorb any liquid beneath that surface that is at the proper temperature (picture warm, hairy water balloons). Agamben moves right along from this observation, but it raises interesting questions for me about the possibilities of taste as a kind of *attuned engagement* in the world, and what it might mean to have it. What kind of carrier of significance is taste, and how do we attribute significance to it?

The questions derived from this perspective of engagement, in my view, raise problems for the standard models of stimulus and response that inform much of the discussion of taste perception, and of the perspectives and protocols of meat science intended to disclose the machinery of taste. If taste is a carrier of significance to which we are attuned, it would not seem readily reducible to any such mechanistic framework. In what follows I elaborate an understanding of how this process of significance unfolds and is expressed in affect, language, and memory. Meat science itself often offers some clues to this signifying process, for it both proposes and records the words used to describe the taste of meat in sensory panels. “Flavour,” reports one respected article, “was the attribute that the focus groups discussed the most and found relatively hard to describe” (Meinert, Christiansen, et al. 2008: 312). Indeed, it is notable how wide-ranging accounts of taste are when they are offered in reports on tasting panels. The very same meat sample, for example, can be described in some instances in the exact same terms (as, for example, “intensive” and “acidic”) but either preferred or rejected for those attributes (e.g., one panelist reports, “Good flavor; A little acidic,” while another says of the same sample, “Sour, a little boring in flavor”). Conversely, the same sample can be described in exactly the opposite terms (e.g., “very meaty taste” or “not really meat flavor”). Rather than saying that there’s simply no accounting for taste, we might look directly at some of the language used in the sensory analysis of pork. Consider the following table as a not-atypical example of how sensory attributes are described in pork tasting:

	<i>Sensory attributes</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Reference</i>
ODOUR	Fried meat	Fried pork aroma	Fried pork schnitzel
	Burnt	Charred pork crust aroma	Well done fried pork schnitzel
	Roasted nut	Roasted nut aroma	Roasted walnuts
	Piggy	Piggy aroma	Melted pork fat
	Acidic	Acidic aroma	Leavened fresh milk
FLAVOUR	Fried meat	Fried pork flavour	Fried pork schnitzel
	Burnt	Charred pork crust flavour	Well done fried pork schnitzel
	Sweet	Sweet taste	Sucrose (1%)
	Acidic	Acidic taste	Citric acid (0.1%)
	Salty	Salty taste	NaCl solution (0.001%)
	Piggy	Piggy flavour	Melted pork fat
	Metallic	Metallic taste	Copper coin

Source: Data from Meinert, Tikik, et al. (2008: 252).

The series of replications across these categories—the “roasted nut” quality that smells like “roasted nut aroma” as found in “roasted walnuts”—suggests, at a minimum, the challenge of disarticulating perception, objects, and language when it comes to taste. In spite of the mechanical reduction of taste to chemoreception and volatile compounds in meat science, things in the world (or perhaps in the world of meat) seem to *be* what they *are*, in both our ability to taste them and our ability to express the qualities of those taste perceptions. This isomorphism between language, subject, and object on matters of taste was further suggested to me in a conversation I had with a chef about the breed of chicken she was using at her restaurant. The tasting panel she convened had preferred an organically raised free-range local bird for the “really deep flavour” it had. “It really *tasted* like something,” she said. And what, I asked, did it taste like? “It tasted like chicken!”

How might this lamination of world, perception, and language with respect to taste have implications for the pronounced associations of taste and memory and, in particular, the notion of pork having a “lost taste” that could be recuperated? Consider one of the more intriguing sensory attributes from these meat-tasting descriptors: pork that smells and tastes “piggy.” At one level, this looks like the example par excellence of the unity of subject and object characteristic of taste—a taste that is the quintessence of the thing in itself. At the same time, this clearly is *not* what is entailed in the category of piggy, which implies a certain off or excessively intense flavor and odor. “The distinct pork-like or piggy flavor noticeable in lard or cracklings and in some pork,” according to the text *Food Chemistry*, “is caused by *p*-[para] cresol and

isovaleric acid that are produced from microbial conversions of corresponding amino acids in the lower gut of swine” (Fennema 1996: 249). The terms *pork-like* and *piggy* as mere signifiers might seem evidence of the inadequacy of language to express the complexity of taste, but as sociolinguistic elements in a *community* of speakers, they are terms that can have specific meanings. And, therefore, they are available for diverse meanings as those communities shift across time and space.

My cursory examination of the meat science literature and the tasting panels convened by meat scientists indicates that “piggy” is a quality solicited and reported primarily (but not exclusively) by Danish researchers. The Danish Meat Association extols their industrial farms by reporting that chops from pigs fed a 100 percent organic diet have a more piggy and metallic odor than chops from conventionally fed pigs (Søltoft-Jensen 2007: 3). Given that pork is truly pervasive in Danish cuisine (Buckser 1999) and that Denmark regularly competes with Canada and the United States as one of the world’s leading pork exporters, it’s perhaps not surprising to find a general public that can discern such flavors as the aggressiveness of too piggy pork-like pork. But note as well that pigginess is a flavor that is increasingly being *promoted* by advocates and connoisseurs of pastured/local/heritage breed pork. In a taste comparison of artisanal British charcuterie, the *Guardian* critics described one brand of *coppa* (air-dried ham) as “oversalted, not enough piggy flavour” or “strong, dry, piggy, not bad” (*Guardian* 2010). In *The Times*, a pork pie is extolled as being “full of piggy flavour,” while a Vietnamese *banh mi* luncheon meat is dismissed for lacking “the true Viet depth of sticky, piggy flavour” (O’Loughlin 2010). In such instances, pigginess is celebrated as an esteemed “deep” feature of real pork.

I do not think that the taste of *pigginess*, as it is used by these British advocates of pork, is identical to the Danish perception of pigginess, although given the vagaries of the lexicon, I am really not certain of this distinction, either. What matters, though, is that the perception of taste is elicited in identical language that can be valorized in opposing ways. In each instance, pigginess, the taste that confirms the presence of the thing in itself, is a carrier of significance that conveys the intensity and force of the animal in question. But is that quality of intensity a form of overpowering excess, or is it evidence of the true, authentic character of the animal, well cared for and naturally raised? As a tangential but not unrelated point, I’d note that male pigs raised for meat as opposed to breeding are almost uniformly castrated in both conventional and pastured farming in the United States, a measure that prevents their meat from acquiring what is called a “boar’s taint.” There are, however, a very few consumers I have spoken with who have eaten “intact” boar’s meat and have a preference for this “tainted” flavor, which they describe, in a parallel fashion, as “aggressive,” “deep,” or simply “strong.” This evaluation of depth or intensity as a signifier with a range of available meanings is also, as I hope to show, an indication of how tastes can be “lost and found.”

## PIEDMONT PIGS AND PORK FAT: A REGIONAL TASTE HISTORY

One of the intriguing things about pork (especially in the United States, in recent years) is that it hasn't always been obvious that pork has a taste or—perhaps—that taste is the quality most relevant for pork producers and consumers. The research I've been doing in the Piedmont of North Carolina with pasture-raised pig farmers, chefs, food activists, and eaters of all kinds is, in part, an investigation into just how the taste of pork—and fatty pork, at that—has come to be relevant to and, in many ways, exemplary of flavor and taste more generally; as well as iconic of the potent, robust pleasures of eating for the locavores, artisans, and foodies who have embraced pastured pork production in this region and across the country.

At the same time, as I have indicated, appeals to taste, like those made by advocates for local foods and the virtues of terroir, or a “taste of place” (Trubek 2008; Weiss 2011), are ways of evaluating temporality, and so attention to taste affords us an important (perhaps even privileged) perspective on processes of making history. And making history through fat pigs is very much what many food activists, chefs, farmers, and consumers have in mind in the contemporary United States. I have been engaged in ethnographic work with participants in this food movement, in fields, farmers' markets, and restaurants (as well as classrooms and agricultural extension offices) across the Piedmont of North Carolina, a region that extends from the Triad (formed by the cities of Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point) in the west to the Coastal Plain in the East. A dedication to pork and the pigs that possess it has a very concrete material history in the Piedmont. Here's how the story unfolds: From a high of over 600,000 hog farms in 1980, the number of hog farms in the United States fell to 200,000 by the mid-1990s and to less than 70,000 by the early 2000s. Simultaneously, the average annual output of hogs per farm increased from 1,000 in 1980 to 400,000 in 1999. Plainly, the agricultural dictate of Earl Butz (secretary of agriculture under Presidents Nixon and Ford) to “get big or get out” was most fully realized in hog production. Confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and corporate contracting became the infrastructural technologies that facilitated this wholesale transformation. Nowhere has this process been more rapid or pervasive than in North Carolina, home to Smithfield Foods, the largest meat packer in the world.

This industrialization was accompanied by the National Pork Producers Council's campaign to promote “The Other White Meat,” described at the beginning of this chapter. This national campaign (1987–2005) was surprisingly *unsuccessful* in many ways. While the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

suggests that pork sales rose by 20 percent in the first five years of this campaign, longer-term assessments indicate that pork consumption in the United States has remained at a relatively stable level since the 1910s. Moreover, since 1998 the production of the live animals has been unprofitable. In 2009 hog farmers who market their pork in the United States are losing about \$20 per pig (National Pork Producers Council 2009). Industrial pork, like most American industrial agriculture since the 1970s, survives through tax breaks and direct subsidies (Blanchette 2010). Nonetheless, the model of vertical integration based on the consolidations of economies of scale continues apace. These industrial processes, as I indicated above, radically transform the very biology of pigs and the taste of pork. The industrial process breeds a long and lean hog, which maximizes the marginal returns available to pork growers and encourages the sale of such innovative, higher-priced products as “lean bacon” and “tenderloin” (as opposed to simply tenderized loins or other cuts of pork), which are notably free of fat and quintessentially exemplify the “other white meat.”

In a host of ways, these historical transformations in North Carolina offer a microcosm of wider rumblings in the American food system. Moreover, these dramatic changes have attracted a wide range of critics who decry all aspects of this intensified process of industrialization, from the cruelties inflicted on pigs through the confinement system, to the environmental degradations wrought by the industry, to the dangerous, often criminal nature of labor exploitation in factory farms and processing facilities (Kaminsky 2005; Kenner 2009; Morgan 1998; Niman 2009). In addition, critics of such industrial agriculture often lament the tastes of the food it produces; with respect to pigs and pork, it is the absence of fat that is often decried. And, indeed, bringing fat back into pork has been one of the ways that advocates for change in the industrial system have both worked to bring about transformations and demonstrated the clear superiority (in their view) of alternative production methods. In an interview I conducted with one such chef committed to promoting these alternative methods, I asked him what qualities he was looking for in the “local pork” he featured at his restaurant. Was it some specific breed of pig, I wondered, or perhaps healthier meat derived from a pig raised outdoors and unconfined? He told me simply, “I was looking for a pig with some fat on it.” No “other white meat” for him! One of the most popular pork products sold at the farmers’ markets throughout the Piedmont, provided by farmers dedicated to methods of animal husbandry that are today embraced as both innovative and old-fashioned (that is, raising pigs outdoors in unconfined “pastures”), is bacon. Bacon procured from a “pig with some fat on it,” as such pastured animals inevitably are, is no ordinary bacon, for it is self-evidently exceptionally fat. It is so fat that at the market stall where I work each weekend we make sure to tell each of our new customers to cook their bacon at a low heat (preferably in the oven at 325 degrees Fahrenheit for 15 minutes) lest its fat



burn up in the pan. Indeed, these fatty bellies are found on restaurant menus across the Triangle (formed by the cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill).

Our market stall has customers who come each week asking for what one of them calls our “life-changing bacon.” This term (while somewhat idiosyncratic), and the more general popularity of bacon (which at \$12 per pound is roughly two to three times the price of industrially produced bacon), suggests the ways in which bacon as a cut of pork—an especially fatty one at that—is iconic (in the classic Peircean sense) of this alternative food movement. That is, not only are the pigs raised by techniques that oppose the perils of confinement operations, but the fatty bacon they produce also has characteristics that exhibit the virtues of—and in this way resemble (like all iconic signs [Peirce 1955: 101])—this transformed production process. That is, bacon, with its distinctive fattiness, possesses the qualisigns of value (Meneley 2008; Munn 1986) of artisanal, pastured, healthy pig production, which counteract the qualisignificance of the industrially produced, confined, “inhumane” processed pork that is best embodied in what is marketed as healthy, white, lean meat. Bacon and loins are each icons of the productive processes that generate them (pastured and industrial, respectively), and their distinctive qualisigns of fat and lean are embodied in materially meaty form.<sup>3</sup>

In order to elaborate on how this fattiness is (re)generated in pigs, and with what consequences for the taste of pork, the phenomenology of memory and political economy allow me to draw on the history of one particularly salient pig-breeding scheme in the North Carolina Piedmont. The history describes a pig that was literally revitalized as a heritage breed by virtue of its exceptional and excessive fat. In the early 1990s, an animal scientist, Chuck Talbott, at North Carolina A&T (a prominent historically black college in Greensboro), dismayed by the devastating effects of CAFOs on both the animals and the farmers who are increasingly ensnared by this production system, began to look for alternatives to this system of pig production. He is, by his own account, driven primarily by economic concern for farmers no longer able to operate under the onerous terms of those pork contracts. For Talbott this concern stems not from some nostalgic appeal to a disappearing way of life but from questions of food security and environmental degradation. And it was only relatively later, toward the end of the 1990s, that he hit on the idea that *taste* might be a significant factor in farmers’ ability to market pork raised on pasture rather than in confinement.

Talbott told me that he came to this realization when he read Edward Behr’s summer 1999 edition of “The Art of Eating.” This “quarterly letter” was entitled “The Lost Taste of Pork” and focused on the efforts of Paul Willis, a pig farmer in northern Iowa who was committed to raising his pigs outdoors, in straw and hoop houses, even as outdoor pig production declined precipitously in Iowa through the 1970s and

1980s. As a literate piece of foodism, Behr's essay draws special attention to the ways that pigs raised in this fashion produce delectable pork. Behr's first experience eating Willis's pork came when eating a "thick chop . . . roasted before a wood fire" at Chez Panisse, which inspired his pilgrimage to Iowa. In his letter, Behr offers a thorough survey of the techniques of outdoor production and its advantages over confinement for both the health of the pigs and the environment, a point he makes by repeated reference to the horrific stench of CAFOs. His elaboration of Willis's farming expertise redounds to the taste of the pork produced. As Willis puts it, "If something tastes good . . . I think it reflects the health of whatever it is you're eating. Allowing the pig to behave as naturally as possible is enhancing the eating quality" (quoted in Behr 1999: 12). "It tastes like the pork I had when I was a little kid" is how one of Willis's neighbors describes it (quoted in Behr 1999: 18).

Upon reading Behr's essay, Talbott contacted Willis about how to promote the same production practices and cultivate consumers and markets more generally across North Carolina. By now, Willis was the pork manager for Niman Ranch, a company that markets meats raised by a network of farmers and ranchers who raise animals according to a variety of welfare and environmental standards. And so Talbott sought to promote pastured pork production by providing opportunities for pig farmers to market their meat through Niman Ranch. This strategy was further supplemented by subsidies, not from the farm bill, but from the tobacco buyout (Golden Leaf Foundation 2011). Funds from the tobacco settlement in the early 1990s were made available to help tobacco farmers convert to other kinds of crops. In this environment, Talbott developed the Golden Leaf Project targeted to "under-resourced" small farmers who had less than ten acres devoted to tobacco in order to fund their conversion to outdoor pig production. These farmers would be educated in outdoor pig farming techniques by Talbott's staff in the swine husbandry department of A&T and would have their facilities and—ultimately—the quality of their pork certified by Niman representatives. The pork raised on this pasture would be sold under the Niman brand, largely through Whole Foods and direct sales to chefs.

This set of material, institutional arrangements—"marginal" farmers, capitalization from the tobacco buyout, a branded network of high-end meat producers, and the scientific expertise of swine husbandry in a historically black college—fundamentally reshaped the market for pasture-raised pork in central North Carolina. And, for our purposes, it is especially important to recognize the vital role that *taste* played in motivating these actors. According to one of the extension officers who worked on this project, Talbott became, in effect, a meat scientist, driven by an interest in the ways that pasturage, feed, and behavior produced the taste attributes prized by discerning consumers. In pursuit of these discerning consumers and the pigs they preferred, Talbott travelled across southern Europe, looking

at varieties of pigs that were, as he put it, “part of the whole way of life” in little towns and villages where pork production and provisioning are integrated into the seasonal round, the very paragon of Slow Food’s “Ark of Taste.” Upon returning to North Carolina, Talbott found that an insular group of pigs on Ossabaw Island (a Sea Island near Savannah, Georgia), with ancestral ties to Spanish Iberian *pata negra* (black foot) pigs, was being culled by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources because they threatened the ecology of the island, most specifically, the endangered loggerhead turtles that nested there. Given these Ossabaw hogs’ ties to the celebrated Iberico pigs that Talbott had encountered in Spain, Talbott and the swine husbandry team at A&T became extremely excited about the prospects of raising a herd of Ossabaws as a niche-market heritage breed (certified by the American Livestock Breed Conservancy). Today, the Ossabaw Island Hog is raised by small but growing number of farmers across the Eastern Seaboard and in a few places in the Midwest.

It is also important to note that the Ossabaw—and other types of pigs that have been revitalized as heritage breeds—are materially different from industrial hogs in ways that go beyond their production techniques. In addition to the ancestral connection of Ossabaws to Iberico pigs, for example, the physiological adaptations these hogs had acquired through 400 years of island life are also important to their viability—and materiality. As an insular breed of pig, Ossabaws are adapted to the resource limitations of their island territory. As feral pigs, they became smaller, a process called “insular dwarfism,” and further developed the capacity to drink brackish water. But what makes the Ossabaw Island hogs especially suited to pork production is the unique biochemical system of fat metabolism they developed. The “thrifty gene” these pigs developed enables them to store a larger proportion of fat than any other hog. Indeed, Ossabaws have the highest percentage of body fat of any nondomestic mammal (Watson 2004: 114). This remarkable ability also produces a tendency to develop type 2 diabetes, which made these hogs of interest to medical researchers. In 2002 a group of twenty-three pigs that had served as animal models in an National Institutes of Health research study in Columbia, Missouri, were “rescued” from being “sacrificed” and were donated to Talbott and his program in swine husbandry at A&T (Kaminsky 2005).

## TELLING THE TASTE OF FAT

But what is the taste of the Ossabaw and its characteristic fat? How does its taste connect it to the Spanish *pata negra* with which it shares ancestry, or with other heritage breeds raised by similar methods of swine husbandry across this region and

elsewhere? How might this taste be implicated in the complex and varied narratives—of heritage, adaptation, cultivation, ecology, and connoisseurship—by which this domesticated American breed comes to be? This chronicle is further informed by more general claims about the “lost taste of pork,” where fat replaces lean, and the capacity of these animals to not just taste good but recuperate taste. What I can further show is that that such recuperation is also a form of innovation that brings with it, not surprisingly, a new taste of pork.

How can such tastes be told? Recall that in my consideration of meat science’s approaches to taste, the ambiguity of terms like *piggy*, *off*, and even *strong* suggested that the very same terms could be used to describe (the same?) tastes that some found desirable and others found repellent. The consumers of pasture-raised pork in central North Carolina confirm some of these disparities, expressed less as positive and negative evaluations of the same flavors than as different perceptions of what is widely agreed to be some very tasty pork. The pig farmers with whom I’m working serve a wide area of central North Carolina. This region is remarkably, and increasingly, diverse in demographic terms (North Carolina is the fastest-growing state east of the Mississippi), and consumers of pastured pork—more commonly called local pork—reflect that diversity. It’s well known that purveyors of such artisanal “slow” foods are often perceived to be catering to a foodie elite that can afford, for example, pork chops that cost \$10 per pound. But what’s also clear is that consumers have different tastes that shape their purchasing decisions. In very rough terms, the Triad is part of a Southern rustbelt, an industrial group of towns that were once dominated by textile and woodworking mills that have in living memory departed for cheaper labor in Latin America and East Asia; in turn, the Triangle is an epicenter of high-tech corporate enterprise, from big pharmaceutical companies to software engineering firms, facilitated by proximity to academic research centers. Among the farmers I know who sell in both regions, the Triangle is known as a region of avid customers, eager to try new things and pay for them. As one beef farmer put it, “Three years ago when I first started processing cattle, I kept a flank steak for myself figuring it would never sell. I must have had fifteen customers at the Durham Farmers’ Market ask me for a flank steak! I haven’t eaten one since then.” Along the same lines, a pig farmer with the same Triangle clientele told me, “I’d make a fortune if I could figure out how to raise a pig with four bellies” (a sign as well of the qualisignificance of belly-providing bacon). These customers also crave personalized attention and narrative accounts of “heritage” (like the one I’ve recounted above) along with their farmers’ market purchases. In contrast, the customers in the Triad are thought of as reluctant to try new things, and it’s a hard sell to get them to pay the premium prices that pastured pork commands. As a result, small packs of ground beef and breakfast sausage are the biggest sellers at the Greensboro Farmers Market.

Moreover, while both sets of customers are, by their own accounts, drawn to the taste of pastured pork, my ethnographic inquiries have found that each apprehends taste in rather different ways. In a customer survey I conducted, Triangle customers described the taste of their preferred pastured pork in terms like these:

“The taste is so different, so superior to mass-produced meat products!”

“Pork that tastes like pork, not ‘the other white meat.’”

“The taste—so yummy and *different* than any other bacon I’ve ever had.”

“The taste is superior to all of the commercial pork products I used to buy. In addition I like knowing where my food comes from, that it was raised with care for both the animal and the environment, and in buying it I am supporting values I believe in.”

“The meat tastes excellent—but it’s not just the sensual flavor of the meat, it’s the mental knowledge that what they do is responsible, for the planet, people, and animals.”

Triad customers speak much less frequently in such terms of “ethical consumption”; rather, they are inclined to appreciate pastured pork for recapturing the tastes they recall from a bygone era. “Tastes like the best meats I have had as a child, that was home grown and free-range”; “the pork tastes the best, like what Grandfather used to have when he had a farm down in Florida where the pigs had lots of pasture.” One of the most renowned barbecue pit masters, Ed Mitchell, who (until recently) offered pastured pork at his Raleigh restaurant, sums up this appreciation of its taste this way:

The pork knocked me down. It tasted like the barbecue I remember from the tobacco days; juicy, and full of flavor. I knew that was the pork my grandfather ate all his life. I knew that was the old-fashioned pork we lost when near about everybody went industrial. (quoted in Edge 2005: 54)

Here, in short, are tastes both lost and found, an appreciation of innovation, pork unlike any other. Such pork is unique and laden with *distinction* in its methods of “responsible farming” and nonindustrial/commercial qualities; and, at the same time, as farmers stereotype Triad consumers preferences, it is “pork that tastes like my granddaddy used to raise,” redolent of concrete times and places and connections to both kin and personal experience.

As I indicated in my discussion of the iconic status of bacon, these tastes of both innovation and nostalgia are embedded in the fat of the pig. That is, when consumers and chefs extol the virtues of this simultaneously “new” and “old-fashioned” pastured pork, they inevitably are drawn to its fat as evidence of these virtues. Note

Mitchell’s discussion of the “juicy” pork he prefers, the fat that could be found in “the pork my grandfather ate all his life.” If taste is a way of evaluating carriers of significance, then much of the significance of pork is carried in its fat. Fat exhibits, to return to my original point, qualisigns of ambiguity, for it exemplifies—all at once—a traditional, forgotten experience rooted in kinship and loss, as well as innovation, superiority, and ethical environmental practice.

## CONCLUSION

Let me turn briefly to two examples (both of which I’ve discussed elsewhere; see Weiss 2011, 2012) of attempts to narrate the taste of heritage pork that further detail this complementary dualism of tastes lost and found. The American Livestock Breed Conservancy has introduced evaluation and tasting protocols (in coordination with Slow Food and Chefs Collaborative) for the meat from heritage breeds of animals, which call for “Renewing America’s Food Traditions” (RAFT Alliance 2013). This language of renewal and tradition is unsurprising, but consider the results of one intriguing evaluation. Chuck Talbott, along with Peter Kaminsky of the *New York Times*, convened a professional tasting panel in order to assess and codify the taste of acorn-finished Ossabaw. Acorn consumption recalls, again, the historical narrative of these pigs, whose Iberico relatives are finished on acorns before their hams are cured as *jamon iberico de belota* (*belota* is Spanish for acorn). The panel found that “forest-finished” Ossabaw has a “deeper, more complex flavor” than the meat of animals finished on grain. They also report, to a high degree, what is called (by pork industry standards) an “off-flavor,” a category labeled “dark turkey meat” in meat science. To reconcile this apparent discrepancy (pork that tastes so good that it tastes bad, or off; the technical term for this in the food taste business is *funky*), Charles Talbott et al. (2006: 189–90) determined that “[f]or niche-market applications, a new ‘On Flavor’ classification may be required to distinguish differences in conventional sensory models.” The lost taste of mast-fed pork, then, demands new modes of description, perhaps even new models of taste.

The other example has to do less directly with tasting than with ways of cooking these chronicled pigs that similarly combine innovation and nostalgia. “Renewing Food Traditions” has also renewed interest in dishes that make use of all manner of interesting, formerly icky bits of pig. Such snout-to-tail cookery is part and parcel of the Slow Food agenda and is especially apparent in the dishes served in the restaurants across the Piedmont that offer pasture-raised pork (Weiss 2012). Not always content to serve up good ol’ Carolina barbecue, local chefs are promoting

their skills, and tempting their customers, with applications like grilled pig tails, pork belly confit, and headcheese. Headcheese, in particular, is embedded with traces of paradoxical experiences. Once eaten in North Carolina as “souse” (and sometimes still eaten), this boiled and congealed *gelée* of pork trimming is recalled as a food of hardship, a bit of meat—often eaten at breakfast—providing a hearty energy source for agricultural labor. This ethos of economizing is certainly praised by the Slow Food chefs and many of the consumers who are so taken with snout-to-tail cookery. But, of course, their own experience of consumption—and so, perhaps, of the taste of headcheese—has little to do with hardship, or even with nostalgic recollections of repasts gone by. Most of them describe such dishes as what they call “*real* food,” a culinary offering, then, that values authenticity rendered material.

This difference is telling and, I would argue, consistent with the claims made by professional panels about the taste of heritage pork more generally. That is, such foods are modes of renewal, evocations of the past (occasionally, but not always, for those who actually did eat this way in their own past), and simultaneously innovative techniques of preparation, provisioning, and marketing of these tastes. The once-lost and now-renewed past is offered, in both instances, not simply as a documentary representation but as an evaluative claim about the past—its complexity, character, and “realness”—as a resource for creating the present and future. To understand taste as a mode of perception with a privileged relationship to memory is (or so I have argued here) to ask about the character of complex alignments of past, present, and future. In this way, taste is a way of making the world, of evaluating the qualities of the past that are felt to contribute to the present, and of further cultivating those qualities one hopes to secure in the future. Creating history in these perceptual ways requires us to grasp the sensory character of the world and our place in it as laden with carriers of significance, mutual attunements beyond stimulus and response. Taste is both of the world and in us; we have taste, and tastes grab us. The particular flavors of pastured pork can reveal how taste offers us a kind of potential, diverse possibilities for aligning historical processes. Pigginess as “excess” or “authenticity” is iconic of these possibilities. So, too, are lean loins and fatty bellies and bacon, each of which embodies qualisigns of the very different processes of production through which they come into being. In this regard, they also exhibit the divergent historical potential of taste, as this sensory significance divulges thoroughly different orders of labor, ecology, animal welfare, and agriculture more generally. In this way, the qualisigns exhibited by iconic forms conjoin the sensory and the political economic. Tastes in memory are lost and found, heritage and innovation, firmly bound to time and place, as well as

unique and unprecedented. This plenipotentiality of pastured pork—life changing and extra-fatty—demonstrates how tastes assert the significance of the changing worlds that produce not only pigs but ourselves as the consumers of their pork and the bearers of the tastes by which we perceive the worlds we inhabit.