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On the Evanescent and Reminiscent

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In classic accounts, taste is dismissed as a “proximal sense,” too brutish to admit of refinement; and yet the term “taste” is also a synecdoche of aesthetic judgment itself. These contrasts inform this paper, which illustrates their expression in ethnographic particulars drawn from my research on pasture-raised pork in North Carolina. My intention is not to demonstrate what taste *really is*, but to ask how the multidimensionality of taste is realized in practice. This inquiry might further illuminate the connection between human perception and systems of value.

The language of taste is notoriously sparse, but it has certain characteristic features. Both Shapin (2005) and Silverstein (2004) note a stereotypical division in the language of wine (what Silverstein calls “oinoglossia”), for example. On the one hand there are the denotative features of wine tasting that make use of narrow and specialized vocabularies (e.g., nose, bouquet, acidic, dry, sweet); more interestingly, the figurative language also takes a particular form. Highly poetic terms like “backbone,” “gentlemanly,” “understated,” “obtrusive” or today’s favorite “hedonistic” are deployed in ways that, in Silverstein’s terms “index” the taster/speakers concern with “matters of ‘breeding’” and character (Silverstein 2004:643).

Pork tasting has yet to achieve the kind of canonical structure that wine tasting enjoys,[\[1\]](#) but it, too, is characterized by a similar division of denotative and figurative terms. In Meat Science literature, pork is routinely described as “nutty,” “juicy,” “acidic,” “sweet,” or “salty.” And tasting panels convened in these studies—as well as my own ethnographic survey of pork consumers—routinely use terms that derive from “matters of breeding.” Thus, pastured pork is described as “complex,” or “intense,” or “having a real depth of flavor,” or “meat with real character.” In one important tasting (Talbot, et al. 2006) of Ossabaw Hog pork, a recently revitalized “heritage breed,” a panel of chefs found that acorn-fed Ossabaw has a “deeper, more complex flavor” than animals finished on grain. But they also reported an “off-flavor,” a category labeled “dark turkey meat” in meat science. To reconcile this apparent discrepancy the authors hold that “For niche-market applications, a new ‘On Flavor’ classification may be required to distinguish differences in conventional sensory models” (Talbot, et al. 2006: 189-90). An appreciation of “revitalized” pork, then, requires the development of new categories of taste, once again divided into denotative (“dark turkey meat”) and figurative (depth, complexity) terms, the latter

describing qualities that bespeak the character and discernment of the taster (one who knows that something with an “off-flavor” actually tastes good!—see Weiss 2011 for fuller discussion).

It is worth reflecting on these two terms, denotative and figurative, a bit further. The language of taste has a still more specific form. Its denotative terms are not merely narrow and specialized; they tend to take the form of *reference*. It is extremely common, in other words, to denote the taste of one comestible by reference to another edible substance. As Shapin writes, “You can probably get most people to agree that sweet wines are sweet, and that, in the right circumstances, Gewürztraminer tastes of lychees, Cabernet Sauvignon of blackcurrants, Rioja of vanilla and muscat (uniquely) of grapes.” And we can add, Gloucestershire Old Spots taste “nutty” and nut-finished Ossabaw tastes like “dark turkey.” The figurative terms, moreover, are not simply evocative and poetic, nor do they uniformly derive from breeding, or character (“intense” and “funky” are two decidedly ungentlemanly, but commonplace terms of approbation in the pork tasting lexicon). What they are is hierarchical. Terms like “depth” “complexity” “character” and “intensity” are not peculiar to the perception of taste; indeed, each might apply to any experience. They provide, not just a mode of description, but of hierarchization: a way of ranking the relative merits of a given taste. As scholars from Bakhtin to Bourdieu have indicated, such terminological hierarchies are crucial dimensions of the way that tasters *cum* speakers index their own hierarchical positions as suitably qualified to make use of them, thereby demonstrating (indeed, constituting) their own discernment (Silverstein 2004:643-44).

Reference and rank: *these* are the seminal dimensions of the language of taste. I would go further and suggest that both reference and rank are modes of evaluation. The evaluative dimension of rank seems clear enough, but what of reference? If making sense of taste depends upon reference to the taste of other things, this implies that an appreciation of taste draws on a range—however wide or narrow—of shared experience. My sense of taste becomes ever enhanced the wider my range of reference. But what if the taste referred to—the “dark turkey” that Ossabaw pork tastes like—isn’t a part of my experience, and so can’t be appreciated as part of the comestible eaten? I must admit, I’ve enjoyed many a Gewürztraminer, and can even now recall their fizzy brightness; but I couldn’t begin to say what a lychee tastes like (Gewürtz, I guess). One’s relatively limited or expansive range of foods eaten need not mean, of course, that anyone can’t taste and enjoy any given food. But the use of such a field of reference in tasting suggests that extensive experience—not just the quality and character of the eater and the eaten (their “complexity,” or “depth”)—is

indexed in the way that taste is articulated. It also demonstrates the way that quantitative forms (the relative range of foods to which one can refer) are themselves forms of qualitative judgment.

This introduction of past experiences as a ground for evaluation adds an important social dimension to the appreciation of the evanescent. And here's where reminiscence flourishes. For rather than seeing taste as a matter of ever-refined judgment, and all expressions of taste as modes of aspiring to class distinction (Bourdieu 1984), my work with Carolina pork consumers indicates that diverse social milieu can be indexed by a taste for the very *same* food. Certainly many consumers of pasture-raised "sustainable" pork describe its tastes in terms that bespeak forms of distinction and rank.^[2] "The taste is so different, so superior to mass-produced meat products!"; "The Taste – so yummy and *different* than any other bacon I've ever had," is how they describe it. Yet other consumers, from less affluent backgrounds say pasture-raised pork "Tastes like the best meats I had as a child" or "like what Grandfather used to have when he had a farm down in Florida where the pigs had lots of pasture." In the former case, affluent consumers emphasize the uniqueness and superiority of pastured pork—quite literally, its distinction—while less affluent consumers (often those with who have lived in the region longer) draw on a different register of experience. The "distinction" they deploy does not use figurative language that emphasizes *ranked* qualities ("character" and "complexity") nor do they *refer* to broad culinary experience (think prosciutto, Serrano ham, or "dark turkey"). Instead, they make explicit reference to a privileged realm of experience—their personal memories of kinship, place and region. Again, reference is necessary to the articulation of taste, but this reference calls into question a single hierarchical standard to which all tastes refers.

In this way, memory expands the field of reference to establish different criteria for ranking tastes. Alternative hierarchies, and different realms of exclusion and inclusion, can be registered in such taste hierarchies. Experience itself serves as a valued, indeed, privileged, foundation for perceiving quality. Through the incorporation of such intimate reminiscences, distinction is differentiated.

[1] It's getting there: see *New York Magazine's* (Langmuir 2010) discussion of the distinctive taste and cooking qualities of six heritage breeds of pig.

[2] My ethnographic evidence draws on discussions and survey reports from consumers drawn from both more affluent and more “middle-class” consumer (see Weiss nd.)

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