

# In Good Taste: Rethinking American History with Our Palates

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Good food writing can make the mouth water, the nose tingle, and the stomach growl. It invites readers to reconstruct a dish or a meal so that they may reflect on or imagine its taste, flavor, and texture. M. F. K. Fisher is probably the best known of the literary gourmands who helped spark gustatory imaginations and linked words to taste. In her book *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, she evokes the essence of a pea. “I watched the headwaiter, as skilled as a magician, dry peas over a flame in a generous pan, add what looked like an equal weight of butter, which almost visibly sent out a cloud of sweet-smelling hay and meadow air.” In describing her own perfect garden peas she wrote,

Small brown roasted chickens, the best ones I have ever eaten, done for me that afternoon . . . and not chilled since but cooled in their own intangibly delicate juices. There was salad of mountain lettuces. There was honest bread. . . . But what really mattered, what piped the high unforgettable tune of perfection, were the peas, which came from their hot pot onto our thick china plates in a cloud, a kind of miasma, of everything anyone could ever want from them, even in a dream.<sup>1</sup>

What is striking about Fisher’s work is that she not only places the reader at the table with her, but engages all the reader’s senses to evoke taste. To convey the perfection of the peas, she relies on the readers’ previous experiences with the foods (and their imagination of what they could be), conjuring the sensuality of peas freshly picked from the garden, cooked for only the briefest moment in boiling water, and brought steaming to the table with all their vegetal sweetness bursting in our mouths. Although only Fisher and her table mates actually tasted the peas and knew the delight they brought and while her description assumes a universal experience with taste that is unlikely to exist, her vivid descriptions and attention to flavor can evoke a simulacra of the peas based on readers’ previous experiences, especially if those readers share a common gustatory heritage. Rather than arguing for some universal or ahistorical sense of taste, we are suggesting that reading and writing with a sense of taste, one that is both sensitive to context and ex-

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<sup>1</sup> M. F. K. Fisher, *An Alphabet for Gourmets* (New York, 1949), 135, 138–39.

perience and also infused with historical imagination, can help historians think through the contingent nature of taste and its historical meanings.

As historians of food and taste, we find that we depend on our previous gastronomic experiences to try to taste the past. Whether we are reading a grandmother's cryptic recipes, a technical paper, a cookbook, tasting panel notes, or a dietary survey, when it comes to food, we try to taste it in our minds if we can, and sometimes one of us, Gabriella M. Petrick, even prepares foods to give us a better understanding of the techniques used to produce them and of their flavor. (We must confess that Petrick probably has more experience than many historians, since she is a professionally trained chef and specialized in food and wine pairing for many years before beginning her doctoral work. We would argue, however, that honing one's palate and tasting a wide variety of foods are useful pursuits for anyone interested in writing about the history of taste.) Tasting allows historians to place the sensory experience in historical context and to utilize an often-ignored analytical tool: the body's senses. Just as historians of art or music use their senses to analyze material, so too can historians of food and taste. However, using the sense of taste to investigate the past has its limits (we will never know what Fisher's peas *really* tasted like), but exercising historical imagination while attending to how people described past flavor experiences can help us approximate the nature of taste historically.<sup>2</sup> In short, to understand a culture, past or present, we should endeavor to understand how a society feeds itself. It is the ubiquity and everydayness of eating that makes understanding it historically so important. The taste and flavor of food play an important part in social relationships, and a food's taste can embody meanings well beyond what is put into the mouth.

It is only within the past ten years or so that food history—and the access it allows us to the history of taste—has become a field of inquiry. Many of the books written before the 1990s were popular histories tracing the origins and dissemination of dining rituals, culinary traditions, and foodstuffs.<sup>3</sup> Historians who wrote academic texts about food in the 1980s, including Sidney W. Mintz, Harvey A. Levenstein, and Warren J. Belasco, asked complex questions about food's relationship to industrialization. In *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz explored the nexus between the metropolis and the colony through Britain's desire for sweetness. By focusing on sugar as an export commodity, Mintz examined how political and economic power was wielded in interactions between the colonial West Indies and Britain from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. According to Mintz, the rise of the British factory system reinforced Caribbean sugar production. He explained that "cheaper sugar came at a time when its increased consumption was guaranteed not by the sugar habit itself, but by the factory world and machine rhythms which were the background of its use." Mintz concluded that readily accessible cheap calories (in the form of sugar) fueled industrial economies. Furthermore, this proliferation of sweetness ultimately transferred control over the foods workers ate to large corporations, thus transforming not only the British working-class diet but also the country's palate by separating the source of food production from the locus of its consumption. Levenstein saw

<sup>2</sup> For a critical examination of sensory history, see Mark M. Smith, "Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History," *Journal of Social History*, 40 (Summer 2007), 841–58.

<sup>3</sup> Good examples of the pre-1990 popular literature are Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos of an Ordinary Meal* (Toronto, 1986); and Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York, 1973). Notable popular food histories from the early 1990s include Raymond Sokolov, *Why We Eat What We Eat: How the Encounter between the New World and the Old Changed the Way Everyone on the Planet Eats* (New York, 1991); and Martin Elkort, *The Secret Life of Food: A Feast of Food and Drink in History, Folklore, and Fact* (Los Angeles, 1991).

the years between 1880 and 1930 as transformative for the American diet because of the development of new food ideologies, most of them tied to industrialization. While offering a history of the dissemination of nutritional thinking, Levenstein also examined how class and diet were constructed before World War II, complicating our understanding of how food habits changed. Similarly, Belasco critiqued the industrial nature of twentieth-century American food, paying particular attention to an emerging ambivalence toward industrial food within the counterculture. Belasco illustrated how food ideologies could unite various causes, including environmentalism, feminism, diversity, and social equality. Activists wanted not only to produce better, more nutritious foods for themselves but also to transform the food system. Although it was ultimately a quixotic endeavor, many of the counterculture's ideas seeped into food marketing by the 1980s as health consciousness became more widespread.<sup>4</sup>

Since the late 1980s, historians of food and taste in the United States have taken immigration and the creation of creole cuisines as a central theme. Donna R. Gabaccia's 1998 book, *We Are What We Eat*, was the first to examine how ethnic foodways shaped the food industry. By commercializing their native food cultures, "ethnic entrepreneurs" creolized the American diet and helped define a distinctly "American" palate. Rather than a single national cuisine, the American flavor complex was a cacophony of indigenous and immigrant tastes from Native Americans, northern, central, and southern Europeans, Africans, West Indians, and Asians, in addition to regional foodways.<sup>5</sup>

Food as a force in creating national identity is a prominent theme in many food histories. Barbara Ketcham Wheaton's pioneering study, *Savoring the Past*, was one of the first books to examine the history of a cuisine in its relationship to nationalism. Wheaton traced the development of French cuisine through cookbooks produced from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century and argued that the circulation of cookbooks and chefs helped define and solidify French cuisine as part of the French nation. Two edited volumes that provide a range of disciplinary perspectives on identity, authenticity, and nationalism are *Food, Drink, and Identity*, edited by Peter Scholliers, and *Food Nations*, edited by Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton. Scholliers's volume focuses on identity as it is defined through class, age, and nationalism. The essays analyze how food or drink is used to establish and enforce group boundaries across space and time in an effort to preserve national or cultural identity by defining what foods are or are not authentic components of national or ethnic cuisines. *Food Nations* examines identity and nationalism in relation to the market for, and the commercialization of, food and the subsequent effect of industrialization on "American" taste. Because of the close association between the senses of taste and smell, students of olfaction have also had helpful things to say about industrialization and taste.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sweetness in Modern History* (New York, 1985), 166; Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York, 1988); Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca, 1989). See also Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Foods and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998). See also Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Princeton, 2000); James E. McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York, 2005); and Jeffrey Pilcher, *Que Viva los Tamales: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, *Savoring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300–1789* (New York, 1983); Peter Scholliers, ed., *Food, Drink, and Identity: Cooking, Eating, and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages* (New York, 2001); Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, eds., *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York, 2002). On the concept of *terroir* (the notion that food takes its flavor from the soil it is grown or raised on)

Recently, historians of food have begun to pay greater attention to the relationship between cuisine, national identity, and taste. T. Sarah Peterson's 1994 book, *Acquired Taste*, for example, illustrates the transformation of the French palate from one based on sweet spices to one based on salt. While the notion that societies have distinctive flavor preferences may seem commonsensical, Peterson is the first historian to examine how a society shifted away from one set of flavors and toward another. As Peterson explains, the French moved from what she terms a medieval palate to an Enlightenment or modern palate based on shifting beliefs about religion, science, and medicine. As ideas about the medicinal quality of food to heal both body and soul changed in the mid-seventeenth century, Peterson argued, the new French cooking based on salt and acid quickly became "the required taste" at the French court, and these flavors quickly spread across Europe and into colonial holdings. Thus, by linking Enlightenment thinking to food habits, Peterson showed how a fundamental shift in palatability reorganized trade and agriculture and laid the foundation of haute cuisine as we know it.<sup>7</sup>

American historians have begun to write about food and, less often, taste, exploring how they reflect broader cultural ideas of what it means to be an American. For example, Roger Horowitz's 2006 book, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, illuminates a distinctly American taste for various meats. In one revealing example, Horowitz traced the transformation of the pork on Americans' tables from cured to fresh meat, largely due to the proliferation of inexpensive fresh beef. Quite literally, Americans' taste for salted barrel pork disappeared as meat-packers shipped large quantities of beef to urban markets in the late nineteenth century. Confronting a cultural preference for beef, pork producers needed to rethink the nature of pork and ultimately settled on a product that was more like beef in flavor, texture, and appearance than like ham or bacon. Hasia R. Diner has shown how ethnic palates were transformed by the American immigrant experience. While writing more about food habits than about taste, Diner illustrated how foodways were re-created, reconfigured, or rejected by different ethnic groups, in this case Italian, Irish, and eastern European Jewish immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth. James E. McWilliams used a similar framework to explore colonial foodways in *A Revolution in Eating*. Unlike Diner, who largely argued for the continuation of ethnic foodways, McWilliams emphasized the transformation of colonial diets based on regional food resources, although each book contains a notable exception. In Diner's it is the Irish who adopt an "American" diet and forgo an Irish food culture in the United States. In McWilliams's it is New Englanders who reject distinctly American foodstuffs in favor of re-creating a British diet.<sup>8</sup>

These works highlight a constant tension not only in food history, but in any history of taste. The tension is the extent to which taste is either sticky, in which case people tend to eat the same foods over and over, or plastic, in which case people incorporate new foods into their diets and cuisines. Diner focuses her work on the former, McWilliams on the latter. Together, the books show that taste is historically contingent and that trying to un-

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in relation to nationalism and identity, see Kolleen Guy, *When Champaign Became French: Wine and the Making of National Identity* (Baltimore, 2003); and Amy Trubek, "Place Matters," in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York, 2005), 260–71.

<sup>7</sup> T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca, 1994), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation* (Baltimore, 2006); Diner, *Hungering for America*; McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*.

derstand the foods Americans ate can help us better understand who we were as Americans as well as who we have become.

While the historiography of food is growing in volume and sophistication, taste as a discrete analytical tool or a sensory experience rarely appears in the literature. Few historians, including those of food, have answered George H. Roeder Jr.'s call for more attention to the senses, including taste, and to the lived experience of historical actors. We suspect this neglect stems from the low cultural standing of taste relative to the other senses. As the philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer has explained, taste has traditionally been cast, along with smell, as a lower-order sense at least since Plato and Aristotle wrote about the senses.<sup>9</sup> One reason taste rests near the bottom of the sensory hierarchy is the corporality of the sensory experience—to taste food, it must be placed inside the body. Every other sense except touch perceives objects outside the body and usually at a distance, so philosophers deemed vision and hearing more cerebral and elevated and less somatic and animalistic. Physiologically, taste is also one of the most basic senses, with all mammals sharing the same sense of taste; humans, dogs, and rats all taste salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and a recently added fifth taste, *umami*, often described as meaty, alkaline, mineral, or full flavored.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, taste alone does not generate our perception of flavor: flavor is a marriage of several sensory stimuli. While olfaction is the second most influential element in constructing flavor, tactile, auditory, and visual stimuli also shape the experience of taste. The viscosity of taste and our inability to engender flavor independent of the other senses are likely factors in the neglect of taste as a way to understand history and culture.

Furthermore, writing about taste is unlike writing about vision or hearing, where the objects of analysis, sometimes centuries old, nonetheless persist and can, at least to some degree, be reexperienced.<sup>11</sup> Taste, like smell and touch, is ephemeral, and its historical

<sup>9</sup> George H. Roeder Jr., "Coming to Our Senses," *Journal of American History*, 81 (Dec. 1994), 1112–22. Donald M. Lowe has argued that the senses and sensory perception are based on historically contingent epistememes. The oral-chirographic (handwritten) world of the Middle Ages succumbed to the visual world of the Enlightenment and later to the multisensorial environment of postmodernity. According to Lowe, vision and hearing, which have become the dominant senses, prevent us from fully participating in our sensory worlds. See Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perceptions* (Chicago, 1982). Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, 1999), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Recently, scientific researchers have defined a new elemental taste, *umami*. It involves the binding of glutamate, found in meat, fish, and legume proteins as well as monosodium glutamate, to protein receptors on taste buds. Although many flavor scientists now describe five rather than four types of taste receptors in the mouth, the existence of a fifth taste is still debated in the scientific literature. Joseph G. Brand, "Biophysics of Taste," in *Tasting and Smelling*, ed. Gary K. Beauchamp and Linda Bartoshuk (New York, 1997), 14; Linda M. Bartoshuk and Valerie B. Duffy, "Chemical Senses," in *Comparative Psychology: A Handbook*, ed. Gary Greenberg and Maury M. Haraway (New York, 1998), 282–89; Andrew J. Taylor and Deborah D. Roberts, eds., *Flavor Perception* (New York, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Books in the Sensory Formations series assemble classic and new essays to examine particular senses and questions about sensory analysis in the humanities and social sciences. Titles include David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (New York, 2005); Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (New York, 2004); Jim Brobnick, ed., *The Smell Culture Reader* (New York, 2006); Constance Classen, ed., *The Book of Touch* (New York, 2005); Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik, eds., *Cultures of Vision: The Alternative Visual Culture Reader* (New York, forthcoming); David Howes, ed., *The Sixth Sense Reader* (New York, forthcoming); and Korsmeyer, ed., *Taste Culture Reader*. Most relevant to this essay is Jean-François Revel, "Retrieving Tastes: Two Sources of Cuisine," *ibid.*, 51–56. For a fuller treatment, see Jean-François Revel, *Culture and Cuisine: A Journey through the History of Food*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Garden City, 1982). While taste is a neglected topic, nonscientific works from a variety of disciplines address taste, although many of them are not explicitly sensory and do not unpack taste as a category of analysis. On the development of a taste for sweetness, see Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*. On sweetness in Britain, see Laura Mason, *Sugar-Plumbs and Sherbet: The Prehistory of Sweets* (Devon, 1998); and Tim Richardson, *Sweets* (London, 2002). On sugar and sweetness in the United States, see Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionary, and Consumers in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore, 2002). On the dominance of taste as a sense in the medieval period, see Charles Burnett, "The Superiority of Taste," *Journal of the Warburg and*



imprint is thus very faint and intensely personal. The accessibility of cultural artifacts that depend on vision and hearing, such as paintings, drawings, posters, texts, film, photographs, instruments, musical scores, and audio and video recordings, have made them the sources that scholars draw on most often. Only now are libraries and museums actively acquiring food-related materials, largely by buying private collections of cookbooks, diaries, magazines, business records, and other ephemera that reveal tastes and foodways.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, there are very distinct challenges for historians who want to focus on flavor and taste as a way to understand the past. Because we cannot reexperience the taste of a particular food or drink from an earlier period, the best food historians can do is to use proxies for historical flavors, such as heirloom varieties of vegetables or meat, or to re-create old recipes with contemporary ingredients, knowing full well that the result only approximates the original. In *Sensory Worlds in Early America*, Peter Charles Hoffer argued the merit of visiting such historical sites as Williamsburg, Virginia, where historians can more fully immerse themselves in the sensory world of a previous generation.<sup>13</sup> At such living history centers, food-production tools, such as the grinding stones, communal baking ovens, and plows of earlier generations, can be placed in their historical, spatial, and sensory context to begin to re-create the flavors, smells, sounds, and sights of past foods. Hoffer's point is well taken, as historians can sometimes literally taste the past by consuming products that have not changed in many decades. Here we think of Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco, Teaberry gum, Parmesan Reggiano, Moxie soda, grain-based Postum "coffee," and gelatin, among other foods. These historical flavors both offer researchers benchmarks for similar but now-lost tastes they may be studying and give them a hint of flavors with strong cultural resonance.

We are sympathetic to Hoffer's efforts to use historical imagination to reexperience the tastes of the past, but only in combination with other sources. Historians can also understand the historical experience of taste through written descriptions recorded by contemporaries in cookbooks, diaries, consumer surveys, and medical, scientific, and technical documents. Using these sources can illuminate how food tasted in particular contexts and at specific historical moments. However, as the philosopher Jean-François Revel cautioned in *Culture and Cuisine*, tastes from the past cannot always be re-created nor can

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*Courtauld Institutes*, 54 (1991), 230–38. For an anthropological examination of taste, see Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passion: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston, 1980), 161–84. For a geographic interpretation, see Armando Montanari, ed., *Food and Environment: Geographies of Taste* (Rome, 2002); especially Jean-Robert Pitte, "Geography of Taste: Between Globalisation and Local Roots," *ibid.*, 11–12; and Massimo Montanari, "From the Geography of Taste to the Taste for Geography," *ibid.*, 28–32. For a sociological perspective, see Alan Warde, ed., *Consumption, Food, and Taste* (Thousand Oaks, 1997). On taste in literature, see Timothy Morton, ed., *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (New York, 2004); Denise Gigante, "Milton's Aesthetics of Eating," *Diacritics*, 30 (Summer 2000), 88–112; and Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> There are large collections of cookbooks at research libraries at Indiana University, the University of Michigan, New York University, the New York Public Library, the New York Academy of Medicine, Johnson and Wales University, and, best known and most frequently mined, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University. Archival materials are much more difficult to find, but the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution and the Hagley Museum and Library are actively collecting materials, many of which are corporate records. Some libraries eager to preserve local histories have collections. Cornell University, for example, has material focusing on canning in the southern tier of New York.

<sup>13</sup> Historians of alchemy similarly re-create historical experiments to understand better how alchemists experienced and interpreted their worlds. See Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and His Alchemical Quest* (Princeton, 1998); and William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, *Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian Chymistry* (Chicago, 2002). Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore, 2003), 8–9.

they be fully understood by subsequent generations because they are ephemeral.<sup>14</sup> At the physical level, Revel is indeed correct: We can never know exactly what a loaf of bread baked in ancient Rome, sixteenth-century Europe, or 1930s New York tasted like or have “authentic” Thai food in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, or Boston. But if we want to try to understand the lived experiences of previous generations, we need to use all the resources we have, imperfect though they may be.

To think historically about taste requires that we consider not only what foods were available but also what food choices individuals made. In his book *Distinction*, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that the collective consumption practices of a social group define its “life-style,” differentiating it from other groups. In other words, you are what you eat. By simultaneously thinking about taste in both aesthetic and organoleptic, or sensory, contexts, historians can explore how class, for example, is expressed through food as a social and a material object.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of class and taste becomes apparent in the contemporary example of organic food. Writers such as Michael Pollan and chefs such as Alice Waters continually expound the virtues of organic and locally grown foods sold at farmers’ markets and specialty stores. These foods are constructed as being more virtuous from a sensory (they taste better), a physiological (they are better for you), and an environmental (they are better for the ecosystem) perspective. But organic foods often cost more than twice as much as conventional produce, which limits who can afford them. This raises questions about the class dynamics of organic foods. When Wal-Mart proposed stocking organic produce for the masses, a loud cry was raised over whether or not the products would be truly organic and how their proliferation would affect the American market for organic food. A subtext of this recent debate was that if Wal-Mart carried organic foods, the products would be cheap and no longer have the cultural resonance they carry at present. As we will suggest, the changing meanings attached to organics are not very different from those earlier attached to iceberg lettuce or to canned food. Shifts in ideas about food in the 1950s and 1960s changed perceptions of the aesthetic and gustatory positions of both those comestibles, ultimately diminishing their cultural cachet and relegating them to working-class foods.<sup>16</sup>

Our current research examines the rise of industrial production in the United States. Gerard J. Fitzgerald’s work focuses on the disorientation and public health consequences of the new sensory environments created by southern textile mill villages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while Petrick’s focuses on the food industry and changing American food habits over the course of the twentieth century. This latter work began as an attempt to understand how millions of people could agree that Heinz ketch-

<sup>14</sup> Revel, *Culture and Cuisine*, trans. Lane, 4–5; Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Introduction,” in *Taste Culture Reader*, ed. Korsmeyer, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Organoleptic* refers to the physical aspects of sensing taste and smell. On how smell informs taste, see Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York, 1994), 197–200. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 175, 178–79.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, 2006); Thomas McNamee, *Alice Waters and Chez Panisse: The Romantic, Impractical, Often Eccentric, Ultimately Brilliant Making of a Food Revolution* (New York, 2007); Melanie Warner, “Wal-Mart Eyes Organic Foods,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/12/business/12organic.html?scp=2&sq=Wal-Mart+organic+food&st=nyt>; “When Wal-Mart Goes Organic,” *ibid.*, May 14, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/opinion/14sun4.html?scp=1&sq=Wal-Mart+organic+food&st=nyt>; Melanie Warner, “A Milk War over More Than Price,” *ibid.*, Sept. 16, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/16/business/16milk.html?scp=5&sq=Wal-Mart+organic+food&st=nyt>.

up tasted better than other brands. When Petrick lived in England and Australia, she noticed that many of her friends were as loyal to Heinz as the Pittsburghers with whom she grew up. And so, we began to think about the taste of Heinz ketchup and more generally about the taste of industrial foods. For us, the flavor of food became central to understanding dietary change in the United States. As our understanding of early food processing developed, the questions driving our research expanded to include: How did Americans transform their diet from foods made in the home to foods made in factories over the twentieth century? And how did manufacturing large quantities of food in industrial settings affect the flavor of these foods as well as consumers' acceptance of them?

More than many other consumer products, food presented unusual challenges to both producers and consumers. Not only were industrial products ingested into the body but those foods helped nourish it. Although many people today think of processed foods as unhealthful, that was not always the case. Food manufacturers who wanted to enter the industrial age in the early twentieth century needed to ensure that their foods were both safe and palatable. These producers, such as the H. J. Heinz Company, Campbell Soup Company, and National Biscuit Company, appealed directly to consumers, using a variety of techniques that included satisfaction guarantees, advertising, elaborate in-store displays, and factory tours. Perhaps one of the most effective methods early industrial food processors used to convince housewives and their families to purchase their goods was product tastings. Food halls at world's fairs, state fairs, and expositions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in-store tastings for store owners and patrons; and in-home demonstrations conducted by door-to-door salesmen gave consumers the opportunity to judge the flavor of the new industrial products before they purchased them.<sup>17</sup> Because of the nature of early processing, food safety and palatability were often at cross-purposes, and both producers and consumers had to make compromises. Indeed, because of technological constraints, industrial food never tasted as good as freshly made food to many consumers. Given the tension between technology and palatability, producers continually sought to make foods that tasted good enough for consumers to purchase again and again and again. For their part, consumers were willing to accept food that may not have tasted like homemade, but there were certainly limits to what consumers thought palatable. While canned corn, peas, tomatoes, and peaches sold well, no one has ever heard of canned lettuce because it just does not taste right to Americans. In the following brief examples, we want to suggest how thinking about taste can help us better understand twentieth-century American life. In the first example we examine the proliferation of iceberg lettuce after World War I, and in the second, the emergence of a teenage palate after World War II.

### Making Salad Iceberg

Iceberg lettuce has not always been the most consumed green leafy vegetable in the United States. Before about 1925, when California's Salinas Valley began producing iceberg lettuce in large quantities, most Americans ate a form of butterhead lettuce (Big Boston) that was loose leafed, soft textured, and buttery in flavor. Iceberg lettuce was originally

<sup>17</sup> *Pickle Manual* (Pittsburgh, 1900), box 55, Heinz Collection (Benson Ford Research Center, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Mich.); *How to Conduct Store Demonstrations* (Pittsburgh, c. 1904), 6, folder 4, box 58, *ibid.*; *Pointers for Salesmen* (Pittsburgh, c. 1920), 8, box 29, Heinz Collection (Library and Archives Division, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Pa.).



developed by the W. Atlee Burpee Company in 1884, but it was not until California farmers began growing lettuce on a large scale that it became a commercial variety. As with many other industrial foods, the iceberg lettuce we know today is very different from the iceberg lettuce of 1884. Early varieties were smaller, deeper green, and much less compact, giving the lettuce a softer, less crunchy texture than today's varieties. The early varieties were probably less sweet and bitterer, with a taste reminiscent of commercial leaf lettuce. The transformation of iceberg lettuce into its current form was largely the result of mass-producing lettuce for urbanizing eastern industrial centers after World War I. That is, iceberg fit into an industrial system that could reliably deliver produce in a reasonably fresh, eatable form.<sup>18</sup>

In the decade after World War I, Americans began to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, largely due to rising real incomes. For those who could afford it, fresh produce—including iceberg lettuce—improved nutrition because it added a wider variety of essential nutrients not found in a cereal-based diet. The availability and consistency of iceberg made it a staple in American homes, especially during the colder months of the year, when eastern varieties of lettuce were not available. Salad became defined as iceberg lettuce with various vegetables (including carrots, cucumbers, red onions, and later tomatoes) or a wedge of iceberg with blue cheese dressing and crumbled bacon or Russian dressing and chopped egg largely because iceberg was one of the few fresh greens available in stores year round. It added variety to winter diets that relied on dried beans and peas, root vegetables, cabbage, and sometimes canned corn or peas. But the lettuce housewives could find at local grocers could be slimy or wilted due to lack of refrigeration or transportation delays from the West Coast. It is also likely that the highest-quality heads went to merchants catering to the upper and middle classes, while more marginal heads landed on pushcarts or found their way into working-class groceries. Although iceberg may have been prolific, the quality and quantity of iceberg one ate depended on the class dynamics of urban markets.

But what does the proliferation of iceberg lettuce tell us about changing taste in the United States after World War I? First, the rapid dissemination of iceberg lettuce to eastern urban markets made it the first mass-produced vegetable available year-round and filled a desire for fresh vegetables. But consumers did not necessarily prefer the flavor of iceberg lettuce to that of other varieties. Such bitter greens as dandelion greens, beet tops, and spinach were available seasonally in the North and the South and apparently sold well.<sup>19</sup> During the summer, iceberg consumption waned because of competition from local growers and home gardens, which provided a variety of greens. Roy R. Scott, a Salinas Valley lettuce grower, was even more specific in his assessment of the difference between homegrown lettuce and commercial crops. He told a Davis, California, audience in 1953 that “we are continually striving to grow a head of lettuce which will satisfy the housewife and still withstand what we commonly call normal transportation hazards. When offered for sale it must be fresh, green, reasonably fine textured, and tender. Otherwise we cannot compete with the coarser, tougher types of homegrown supplies.” Those shipments

<sup>18</sup> On the quality of industrial iceberg lettuce production, see Gabriella M. Petrick, “‘Like Ribbons of Green and Gold’: Industrializing Lettuce and the Quest for Quality in the Salinas Valley, 1920–1965,” *Agricultural History*, 80 (Summer 2006), 269–95.

<sup>19</sup> The *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution* tracked market prices throughout the interwar period, including the fruits and vegetables available for sale in the wholesale markets on a weekly basis.

that did not survive the normal transportation hazards turned into unsalable green-brown goo.<sup>20</sup>

This presents us with two seemingly paradoxical conclusions. First, judging from the rapid growth of the industry and the sheer volume of iceberg lettuce consumed, it seems Americans “liked” the flavor of iceberg lettuce. Indeed, consumption more than doubled between 1925 and 1947 to over twelve heads per capita annually. Yet when other greens were available, consumers reduced the amount of iceberg lettuce they ate, raising a question as to whether Americans preferred it to other varieties. It is ironic that even as Americans consumed more iceberg lettuce and the quality improved because of breeding for better “eating quality,” efficient cooling and transportation systems, and refrigerated produce sections in suburban supermarkets, the taste for this industrial vegetable declined. The low price of iceberg compared with that of other fresh vegetables allowed all but the poorest Americans to eat lettuce regularly. Its ubiquity in military mess halls and industrial cafeterias also contributed to the declining status of iceberg lettuce during and after World War II. By the mid-1950s, industry pundits noted that iceberg was considered a working-class food and lamented that newer foods such as instant mashed potatoes and frozen peas had taken its place. Americans’ cultural taste for iceberg lettuce quickly waned as it became an everyday affair; yet, their organoleptic taste for this mass-produced commodity helped define salad as iceberg lettuce, and it still does for most Americans, although newer baby lettuces that can be harvested mechanically may ultimately supplant iceberg as America’s salad green.<sup>21</sup>

### The Sweet Taste of Youth: Postwar Soda Consumption and the Adolescent Palate

Norman Rockwell, as a commercial illustrator and a cover artist for the *Saturday Evening Post*, created a vision of everyday life in America. It is telling that his *Soda Jerk* appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on August 22, 1953. The picture depicts a teenaged soda jerk flirting with three swooning teenaged girls over sodas, while an older man looks on in wonderment. This bucolic picture depicted teenagers working and consuming in an affluent postwar society. The adult in the scene clearly does not belong to the teenage world of the soda shop. In the 1940s and 1950s, soda and teens became linked in more than popular culture; soda became a tolerated indulgence of a distinctly teenage palate after the war. The recognition by sociologists, physicians, educators, and parents that adolescence was a distinct stage of life created a space for a teenage palate to emerge.

<sup>20</sup> On the presentation by Roy R. Scott, sales manager, Harden Farms, Inc., at Davis, California, Feb. 7, 1953, see “Problems of Growers and Shippers,” *Salinas Californian*, March 14, 1953, p. 10, scrapbook: 1949–1960 (Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association of Central California, Salinas, Ca.).

<sup>21</sup> F. J. Veihmeyer and A. H. Holland, *Irrigation and Cultivation of Lettuce: Monterey Bay Region Experiments* (Berkeley, 1949), pamphlet (University of California, Davis); Paul F. Sharp and M. W. Parker, “Notice of Release of Lettuce Varieties Golden State A, and Golden State B,” Oct. 20, 1957, folder: USDA Research 1953–1961 (Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association of Central California); E. M. Seifert Jr., “This Is the Lettuce Business,” *Packer*, Oct. 8, 1955, scrapbook: 1949–1960, *ibid.* In 1939 C. B. Moore also identified iceberg lettuce as a working-class food. He said “A great deal of this [decline in vegetable consumption] has been due to the general economic trends. . . . In going over graphic trends and noting the condition of many of the larger industrial groups whose employees are the ultimate consumers of our commodities, we do not find a picture that is too optimistic at this time, even though there has been some trend upward in employment and wages among these groups.” “Talk Topics from the Western Growers Meeting,” *Packer*, Nov. 18, 1939, scrapbook: December 1939–March 1941, *ibid.* See also “Address by Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, George L. Mehren,” address to United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, Miami, Florida, Jan. 28, 1964, pp. 3–4, *ibid.*

This “pigtail palate,” as *Seventeen* magazine dubbed it in 1944, consisted of soda, candy, ice cream, hot dogs, hamburgers, fries, and other highly processed junk foods.<sup>22</sup>

Postwar teenagers consumed a lot more of those junk foods, including soda, than any other age cohort. Indeed, soda consumption rose more than 85 percent between 1950 and 1964, largely due to teenage consumption. While children may have craved the same foods, teenagers could access them as a result of their freedom from adult supervision, high disposable incomes, and the opportunity to consume them at home, parties, soda shops, restaurants, drive-ins, bowling alleys, and movie theaters, among other venues. While middle-class postwar mothers did not like this generational sweet tooth, such women also believed that their children would outgrow it once they reached adulthood. The adult palate, by contrast, generally favored more complex bitter flavors as reflected in the consumption of coffee, tea, beer, and, liquor.<sup>23</sup>

The adolescent palate was a source of much consternation and ambivalence for many adults. While mothers may not have wanted their children to drink a lot of soda, they preferred it to alcohol, which many considered the root of juvenile delinquency.<sup>24</sup> A 1961 *Ladies' Home Journal* survey captured women's anxiety regarding soda consumption. Although mothers with teenagers thought that a soda after school with friends was fine on occasion, more than a few sodas a week raised concerns. Yet, these women recognized that they had limited control over their teenagers' soda consumption, especially when they were with friends. Not that mothers allowed their teens to drink soda whenever they wanted. After school or in the evening was fine, but drinking soda with a meal brought gasps of horror and revulsion. When asked about drinking soda with dinner, suburban Philadelphia women responded: “That's unheard of—a thoroughly repulsive idea.” “I should live so long!” “It's bad nutrition and besides it doesn't appeal anyway. Soft drinks are too sweet to drink with dinner.” “That's out completely. I wouldn't think of it.” “Ugh!” One woman even stated derisively: “I'd probably be ready to shoot myself at the very idea of serving any soft drinks with dinner.” This visceral reaction to drinking soda with meals made it clear that soda was incompatible with dinner from organoleptic and cultural perspectives. Additionally, a mother would be remiss if she indulged the teenage palate at mealtimes—it was just bad nutrition.<sup>25</sup>

For such postwar mothers, the palates of their children were just as worrisome as other aspects of their lives. Children needed to be guided through various flavor sensations that were suitable to their age, their sense of taste cultivated and in some cases policed. Small children should be fed mild foods and given large quantities of milk. Adolescents should

<sup>22</sup> Solita Arbib, “Pigtail Palate,” *Seventeen*, 3 (Oct. 1944), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Ko Ching Shih and C. Ying Shih, *American Soft Drink Industry and the Carbonated Beverage Market: A Statistical Analysis and Graphic Presentation* (Brookfield, 1965), 8, 20; Charles E. Strickland and Andrew M. Ambrose, “The Baby Boom, Prosperity, and the Changing Worlds of Children, 1945–1963,” in *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport, 1985), 533. On the relationship between motherhood and food, see Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1986); Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana, 1998); and Jasmine Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> August B. Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth: The Impact of Social Classes on Adolescence* (New York, 1949), 312, 396–400. On the distribution of soft drinks, see Ben Ginsberg, *Let's Talk Soft Drinks* (Springfield, Mo., 1960), 123. On the history of teen culture and consumption, see Claire Cox, *The Upbeat Generation: How America's Youth Is Meeting the Challenge of Our Age* (Englewood Cliffs, 1962).

<sup>25</sup> Trudy Dye, “Women's Buying Habits and Attitudes Toward Soft Drinks,” survey for Readers Reaction Bureau, *Ladies' Home Journal*, pp. Barclay Farms 15, 16, box 2, Noling Collection (Special Collections, University of California, Davis).

be able to make some of their own choices, including soda, but they should also be guided toward adult flavors. Upon adulthood, the palate was deemed mature enough to partake of more complex flavors, leaving the cloying sweetness of adolescence behind. Yet, soft drink consumption did not wane. Rather than giving up carbonated beverages in college, the postwar generation continued to drink soda, and even drinking soda at dinner eventually became acceptable sometime in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup>

The high rate of soda consumption after World War II cannot simply be explained by a natural inclination for sweetness. Cultural forces, as much as affluence and availability, allowed the teenage palate to linger on into adulthood. More indulgent parenting, concerns about alcohol consumption, eating away from home, and desires to fit in with peers all contributed to increased soda consumption. Equally, the development of corn-based sugars in the mid-1960s, including dextrose/glucose, maltose, fructose, and a plethora of corn syrups, in addition to a diet consisting of highly processed foods, helped make sweetness a dominant flavor in the American palate. Yet, sweetness can become sickly sweet. Soda consumption has flattened in recent years with more Americans substituting bottled water for carbonated beverages. As the health consequences of too much sugar, including obesity and diabetes, become more pronounced, cultural forces may once again shift the nation's taste.<sup>27</sup>

Both of these examples begin to suggest how we can write about taste historically. In them, we have tried to think about how an industrial food became such a ubiquitous part of our diet and how its meaning changed over time. In addition to analyzing a collective national palate and how twentieth-century industrialization shaped it, there are many other ways to think about a historical sense of taste(s), including the role taste has played in constructing race, class, gender, regionalism, nationalism, globalization, labor, violence, and power. We also think about industrial taste as a dialectic relationship between producers and consumers. As Edwin T. Gibson, president of Bird's Eye frozen foods from 1932 to 1951, reminisced, "You can have exotic food products and people will buy them occasionally, but they won't eat them regularly."<sup>28</sup> Producers needed to manufacture foods that the vast majority of Americans would eat frequently and that fit into their concept of what tasted *good*. The notion that taste is both something an individual possesses and something negotiated between individuals or groups may open up new analytical pathways.

Just as M. F. K. Fisher could invite readers to taste the perfect spring pea through her writing, historians can also convey a sense of past flavors. As historians, we can adopt some of the stylistic elements food writers employ as well as learn to read and interpret a variety of documents with our sense of taste. Cooking and eating these foods and then writing about their flavors can enhance our understanding of previous generations. We can also reinterpret American history and culture by including gustatory and organoleptic experiences in our prose. By contextualizing taste as a sensory experience while using our historical imaginations, we can begin to understand the sweeping changes industrial pro-

<sup>26</sup> *Beverage World: One Hundred Years, 1882–1982* (New York, 1982), 73, 143–44. See also Fulton, Reid, & Staples, Inc., "Soft Drinks: An Established Industry Maintains Its Momentum," April 24, 1974, box 8, Noling Collection.

<sup>27</sup> Melanie Warner, "Soda Sales Fall for First Time in Twenty Years," *New York Times*, March 9, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/09/business/09soda.html?ex=1186200000&en=7557a058b141268e&ei=5070#>; Shih and Shih, *American Soft Drink Industry*.

<sup>28</sup> Edwin T. Gibson, "The Reminiscences of Edwin T. Gibson," 1956, pp. 19–20, Oral History Research Office (Columbia University Archives, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.).

duction brought not only to everyday life but also to American bodies. By thinking with our sense of taste, we can outline the development of our food systems and investigate the foods Americans liked, the ones they hated, and the ones they could afford. The study of taste can add a rich new dimension to the history of American life as well as provide a foundation useful to those seeking to change the food system or just to coax Americans to eat less processed food, while it also helps them understand why Americans might not want to.