

GUSTATORY AESTHETICS

by Nicola Perullo

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It. *Estetica gustatoria/gustativa/del gusto*; Fr. *Esthétique du goût*; Germ. *Ästhetik des kulinarischen Geschmacks, Ästhetik des Essens*; Span. *Estética gustatoria*. *Taste* (etymologically linked to the Fr. verb *toucher* and to the Eng. *touch*) is a word that up until the 17th century was used in Europe almost exclusively in the physical sense, thus designating the recognition and appreciation of food and drink. Later, the term began to circulate in the lexicon/terminology of European culture with a change of meaning that was destined to characterize its prevalent philosophical use: taste becomes a metaphor of aesthetic knowledge that, for the majority of philosophers – like in the emblematic cases of Kant and Hegel – excludes food and drink and related gustatory experiences. On the contrary, gustatory aesthetics is the branch of aesthetics that claims the possibility of philosophically dealing with taste in its literal and not metaphorical sense. The notion of gustatory (from the Latin verb *gustare*) was coined in the empiricist milieu towards the end of 17th century, and in the 18th century – the so called “Century of Taste” – philosophers like Hume and Voltaire underlined the correlations between the literal and the metaphorical meanings of taste. However, the adjective “gustatory” has become part of the aesthetics discourse only recently.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The roots of the contemporary gustatory aesthetics debate can be traced back to John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934). In this work, after exemplifying the aesthetic experience by the case of a dinner at a French gastronomic restaurant, Dewey presents a description of the food expert (denoted by the epithet of “epicure”): one who possesses expertise to aesthetically appreciate the qualities of food in connection with production and criteria of excellence. Dewey’s position clearly suggested the possibility of an alternative aesthetics, which is contrary to that which is situated under the so-called “hierarchy of the senses”. According to the latter, sight and hearing are the most reliable senses as they are distal and allow an objective knowledge; touch, taste and smell, on the contrary, as proximal, contact senses, refer only to the subjective side of sensation and perception.

After Dewey, the question of the aesthetic status of gustatory taste began to be dealt with in the analytical context during the 1960s. Authors such as Roger Scruton and Frank Sibley debated about it. If Scruton, on the one hand, denies the aesthetic value of taste and smell, Sibley – in *Tastes, Smells and the Aesthetics* – argues, on the contrary, that the gastronomic senses can be genuinely aesthetic, bypassing the question of whether or not the artefacts of gustatory perception are works of art. Also in the European context, from the second half of the 20th century, both the post-phenomenological and the Nietzschean tradition partially addressed gustatory issues. In *Totality and Infinity*, Emanuel Lévinas highlighted the importance of food intake as a gustatory intentionality. More recently, still in France, the philosopher Michel Onfray published *Le ventre des philosophes* (1989), a very fortunate book in which he proposed, in the wake of Nietzsche, an overall interpretation of thought through the food motive that underlies a hedonistic proposal.

However, the rise and full reception of gustatory aesthetics place themselves in a broader cultural context than the philosophical tradition alone. In fact, in the same historical period (the second half of the 20th century), there were studies conducted across various disciplines – history, anthropology, sociology – concerning the cultural, social and symbolic values of food and nutrition, which also contributed to the flourishing of philosophical thought. The works of James Jerome Gibson, for instance, played a major role in this context, also in connection with some developments of the *Gestaltpsychologie*. In *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966), Gibson clearly shows that the taste-olfactory system is a complex multi-sensory and multimodal perception. Gibson's theory has become a main reference point for the psychology of food as well as for many philosophers of perception that study tasting and smelling experiences.

Finally, it was only in the early 1990s that gustatory aesthetics came up explicitly with a series of thematic books. This happened in the United States, through a significant emergence of works realized by female philosophers influenced by feminism and the thought of sexual difference, which pointed out that physical taste has been biased in the history of Western philosophy because of its hierarchization and genderization. Tasting and cooking have to do with proximity and materiality, intimacy, bodily pleasures, and passions; that is, with behaviours and ways of being which patriarchal cultures attribute hierarchically to the female side of humanity. Therefore, gustatory aesthetics came about mostly thanks to women: Lisa Heldke, Elizabeth Telfer and – especially Carolyn Korsmeyer – who, in 1999, published *Making Sense of Taste. Food and Philosophy*, a work that definitively legitimizes the gustatory aesthetics on the philosophical and academic level. This book presents, for the first time, a wide historic and critical reconstruction of the main philosophical ideas around the sense of taste of the palate and, at the same time, proposes a new theoretical collocation within an analytical framework of reference. According to Jessica Jacques, “gustatory aesthetics is to food and gastronomy as (classic) aesthetics is to the arts”. This engagement, however, depends on the acceptation of gustatory taste as aesthetics and – not necessarily, but generally – of gustatory practices as artistic ones. In the modern Western philosophical tradition, there is still a need of preliminary clarification about it.

Today, the question about the functioning of taste does not cease to intrigue beyond the classical themes on its nature of sentiment and/or judgment. According to some scholars, for example, in appreciating food we are capable of expressing pleasure regardless of the knowledge we have about it, even if this can modify it. Similarly, people with a certain level of *expertise* (direct knowledge, based on experience) are able to distinguish between pleasure and the recognition/appreciation of certain qualities, which conform to a certain standard, to a grammar of taste that has been learned and cultivated. However, this does not happen for those who do not have the same level of competence, or for those who have different grammars of taste due to different cultures. A philosophy of gustatory taste, therefore, must also turn to anthropology, sociology, geography and – today – to neuroscience. Under these lenses, very recently there have been attempts to scientifically explain gustatory taste and the taste-olfactory system as well as all other senses. As Barry Smith states, the advent of neural imaging led to better identification of separate cortical and sub-cortical regions responsible for different functions; particular areas were identified, such as the visual cortex, the auditory cortex, the primary smell and taste cortices and the somatosensory cortex. One of the main fields to which these kind of issues of gustatory aesthetics apply to is wine. Wine is the most debated food item, especially with respect to the topics of aesthetic properties, objectivity and subjectivity of taste and expertise.

ART AND AESTHETICS

If the issues related to taste and pleasure concern aesthetics as a theory of food perception and consumption, issues related to the relationship between food and art concern gustatory aesthetics as a theory of the production of artefacts. Can food and – more limited and specifically – cooking be art? Even this philosophically old question continues to provoke debates and reflections, especially today that the figure of the cook/chef has gained a great level of social dignity that was inconceivable a few decades ago. The themes of creativity, the controversial relationship between art and craft, technology and *savoir-faire* are at the centre of this interesting research field. Without considering, finally, the great importance that the representation of food holds (also for the branch of philosophical aesthetics that deals with “fine arts”) in all its possible nuances in the figurative arts, cinema, photography, fiction and, more and more today, in the performances of contemporary artists. Gustatory aesthetics, then, today works also in fields more directly engaged in the artistic debates – such as the creative use of food by contemporary artists and cooks (or cooks as artists) – and also in proposing new approaches to aesthetics and to philosophy itself. In the age of “aesthetization of society”, the flourishing of theories like “aesthetics of everyday life” (Saito), the “new aesthetics” (Böhme) or the “somaesthetics” (Shusterman) view the appreciation of food intake as an ordinary practice that should be taken into account even from a philosophical perspective. These movements, each in their own way, propose to overcome the classic modern paradigm of rigid separation and the hierarchy between the high (mind, spirit, the subject) and the low (body, flesh, the object) in favour of a relational and atmospheric model of knowledge. For example, Hermann Schmitz – founder of the “new phenomenology” – and Gernot Böhme, promoter of the “neo-aesthetics”, make us understand through their investigations on “atmospheres” how taste is a perceptive modality that acts as a bridge

between the subject and the environment. Such a perspective shows how even “physical taste” is a sense that is able to act on a larger scale and even match the emotional state of the perceiver to that of the environment in which the gustatory experience takes place. Stemming from this acquisition of the complexity of gustatory experiences, in the current debate some scholars propose to work with gustatory taste as a medium for understanding human practices also from an ethical and political point of view (taste as a task).

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