

Psycho Taste

PAUL PAIRET

Paul Pairet has been called "a genius" with "a rich sense of comedy". His food has been described as "high art" and "deliciously quirky molecular cuisine". *The Times* (of London) even once famously remarked, "For my last meal on earth, nothing but [Paul's creations] will suffice."

In his *Talk* column, the avant garde chef ruminates on food and cooking, on the art of cuisine and the culture of dining.

"We eat more myths than calories."

—Alain Senderens

What now?

I thought I knew about taste. I know *my* taste buds, those few thousand receptors decoding flavours and communicating with my mind, their Houston headquarter base: "I like, I don't like, I've had it, it's new, how disgusting!... mmmh interesting... what do you think? Shall we keep? Vegemite? Is that food? It's Australian? Oh, okay then..."

Here: the sour. Back: bitter. Front: sweet. All over: salty. Now, umami...

They have discovered that the tongue map was all wrong. New taste cells? Yippie!

The retro 'nasal concept' of aromas, the role of mastication, the interface of saliva...

Why should we go deeper, beneath the emerged part of the iceberg to the submerged? Do we need to intellectualize every basic knowledge and, if so, what for?

Taste is simple, a binary language: black/white; I like/I don't like; point/dot. Can't we be prehistoric for once? Good savage? Can't we just kill the mammoth and get away with a roasted rib? Sure, but mammoths are long gone and there's not much we can do about it: Taste goes far beyond its pure, physical notion as is generally pictured.

Of the five senses, Taste, despite its very tangible and intimate relations with the body, is probably the most complex to define. One sees what sight is about, hearing sounds clear, touch is palpable, we might sniff smell, but what of taste?

Taste depends on sight, on touch, on smell, on (to a little extent) hearing, and on (to a great extent) the mind. In both its interconnections with all senses and its relation with the mind, Taste seems closer to being an impression than a strict sense.

If 'sense' is defined as sensors collecting information that is sent, analyzed and restituted in emotions by the mind, Taste, in its sporadic and deliberate intention, sounds more in control than any 'sense': you can hardly taste without prior consent.

Prior consent makes of taste an active sense based on conscious mind decisions.

'Physical taste' is therefore simply the sanction of what was lying beneath (the infamous iceberg): the psychological taste, a sensitive volcano coupled with a high tech computer. Iceberg, volcano – whatever.

Taste is about a before, a now and an after.

'Psycho taste' – when you start to know him, you use his nickname – might sound like an underground subtlety of taste but is, in fact, a core factor of taste that everyone uses daily, unconsciously. Caricaturally, 'psycho taste' is the taste of taste. In other words, the preconceived

idea of what taste should be based on memory, imagination, experience and culture. It is the taste your mind is anticipating, the expectation you have built about a taste prior to its physical ingestion.

Have you ever wondered about the mouthwatering effect, the flood of saliva, when you're hungry and picturing your favourite food? 'Psychological taste' is a scientific notion, what's far more hypothetical is the real impact of this 'mindset taste' on actual physical taste.

Imagine you have decided on a night out to celebrate, in a restaurant, your wedding anniversary. Your intention has already built your expectations: it's 'a night out', not a business meal. This expectation will ultimately confront the entire experience of the evening but, before the night unfolds, it has already set taste standards and influenced your perception. Well ahead of you forking any substance, 'psycho taste' is already building blocks.

The reputation of the restaurant has probably influenced your choice, and has already conditioned your genuine perception of taste. Because you have heard so much about this fancy chef who is levitating crème brûlée by insufflating hilarious gas in it – hou lala! – you will unconsciously devote an excessive dose of care and attention to any dish, eating with one spine of the fork as if 'delicate' equated 'good'.



You expected the food to be good, you now want it to be good – disappointment is not an option – and you will use your inner little Coué voice: "It's good, it's good, it's good... it's quite common." If the food does indeed happen to be good, the restaurant's reputation will make it taste better simply by having wide-opened your concentration (although, reversely, an exaggerated reputation meeting disappointment might have exactly the opposite effect).

Reputation – a preconceived notion, by definition – digested and blessed by expert or popular recognition, is upstream in the development of psycho taste, and will irremediably shape expectation. It certainly requires a strong dose of independence to judge in the absolute and to avoid the influence of reputation. Even some of the most influential food critics are partially modeling their prejudices out of this parameter.

Of reputation, Henri Bergson said, "When I eat an alleged exquisite dish, its gastronomic reputation interposed in between my feeling and my subconscious, I could think that I love its flavours, whilst an extra dose of attention could prove me wrong." Okay, it *is* Bergson, but anything really might ultimately play a role in the way psycho taste builds up. The way you feel, your physical shape, your satiety, your mood, your company...

Okay, it is suppose to be your wife, you are supposed to love her, and it is your wedding anniversary. Now, if you had the bad idea of leaving your dirty socks on the floor, you might just as well have ruined the taste of the Grand Marnier soufflé.

We'll see in the next column how the phrasing of the menu and, finally, the design of the plate in building visuals make up the final touch of 'psycho taste'.

Paul Pairet is the chef de cuisine at Jade on 36 at the Pudong Shangri-La. www.jadeon36.com.