

Disputations about taste

Published 27 April 2020, with S. Margot Finn.

I've been thinking a lot about taste lately. It's a word with so many different meanings. The primary one, where this all starts, is gustatory taste; what does something taste like. Beyond sweet, salty etc., does it remind you of green grass? A fusty library? Is it vibrant? Dull?

That's the sense of taste in which the old Romans said, there's no arguing about taste.

Because if taste is about what's happening on my tongue, in my nose, in my brain – how can you possibly have anything worthwhile to say about it?

And yet, I'm happy to skip directly to using taste as a judgement. My taste is better than yours. The things I like are objectively better than the things you like. You're a lesser human being because you like things I don't.

Now we're talking about good taste and bad taste, and that's a really big question. Good taste and bad taste sets up a hierarchy. Is that justified?

All this ruminating springs from a book called *Food Fights*, a collection of essays about the history of big topics in food studies. Like taste. There's more about the book in the [show notes](#), but one of the editors is Chad Ludington, who was on the podcast a few years ago talking about how the Irish were responsible for some of the great wines of France.

Chad's chapter in *Food Fights* is about *The Standard of Taste Debate: How Do We Decide What Tastes Best?* It's preceded by a chapter that asks *Can "Taste" be Separated from Social Class?*, by Margot Finn, who teaches food studies at the University of Michigan.

So this is the first in a mini-series about taste; definitely two episodes, maybe three, starting with Margot Finn.

And it pays to make sure we're at least starting off from the same place. So what does Margot Finn mean by taste?

Margot Finn: I think I use it like many people do, in multiple ways. So I'm happy to talk about whether or not I think something tastes good or bad. And I'll also refer to people having good taste or refined taste. And I have a sense of what that means.

This question is making me think the difference between the way we talk about food and the way we talk about other things that we might consume, about which you could have good or bad taste, right, so you can have good or bad taste in music.

Jeremy: But the fact is, although it's a cliché to say, I can't stand his taste in music or whatever it might be, it doesn't impinge on me if you happen to like music I don't like. But there's something very visceral about you having bad taste in food.

Margot Finn: You're right, there may be more. I think that's really astute. There's a greater assumption that other people will share your taste in food, even though of course we all have experiences where that doesn't happen, right? Where you're eating with somebody and they have a very different perception of the thing that you might both be consuming.

So we know that not everybody is necessarily experiencing things the same way. And yet I think there is a greater expectation that if I think something is delicious, other people will also think that that is delicious, and maybe then more of a sense of affront if that turns out to not be true.

Jeremy: Is taste in food, gustatory taste, is that completely subjective?

Margot Finn: I think it's really hard to talk about complete subjectivity when it comes to taste and perception. It's easy to find the examples that make us back away from saying that taste is utterly objective, that it exists only in the food and everybody who tastes the food will necessarily have the same perception of it.

Of course there are genetic differences, like supertasters. And those poor people for whom coriander leaf, cilantro, tastes like soap.

Margot Finn: It is interesting that even with cilantro, right, it's not like 15% of the population thinks it tastes like something awful, but a thousand awful things. Some people think it's metallic, some people think it's ... No. Everybody who doesn't like it seems to agree that it

tastes like soap. So for every experience of food we fall somewhere between: I'm a human who has receptors that tell me sweet things are generally positive and nice, and also, this particular sweet thing is something that my mother cooked and so it has an entirely different kind of sweetness.

Jeremy: And on the other side of the coin, this thing tastes bitter, and when I was a kid, I wouldn't have eaten it, but I've learned to like it. So I've changed my tastes as a result of something or other. You can learn to like things.

Margot Finn: Of course, yeah. Almost everybody has that experience of coming to like something that they did not initially.

Jeremy: But if taste is highly subjective, doesn't that put an end to discussions of what constitutes good taste or better taste?

Margot Finn: In some ways that sort of sounds idealistic to me. If we could be so tolerant of the possibility that other people would have different taste experiences, that we would not judge them for having those tastes experiences. But I think the judgment actually comes more from cultural hierarchy, social hierarchies, than it does from anything inherent in the food or even the experience of tasting and judging food.

The upper levels of those social hierarchies took it upon themselves to "educate" the lower orders in the matter of food. It's an effort that really got going around the 1870s, at the start of America's Gilded Age.

Margot Finn: So one of the things that you see in the gilded age is, there's a sense that we're going to Americanize people, new immigrants, particularly by introducing them to American foods. And also a sense that the poor need help in learning how to eat right, how to make both economically right choices and nutritionally right choices. But there wasn't a strong sense that you were going to have these people eat like the rich. There was sort of, we want you to eat like Americans and we want you to eat good, nutritious food that will make you strong, productive workers. But there was also a sense that it would not be appropriate to teach working class women in the Boston Cooking School how to make really fancy meals.

In part there was a sense that these different classes just wanted different things. The working classes would have basic foods, but the Harvard crew team would need some frills, like strawberry

shortcake. In the sense that working people wanted hearty foods, whereas more delicate foods that would wouldn't fill you up as much could be served to the upper classes. And what was interesting with the crew team example is even then, there was a kind of acknowledgement that, Oh yeah, these guys are athletes doing hard work. We have to feed them well, but because they were seen as being of a different class, they were seen as having different desires, like for strawberry shortcake.

Jeremy: I'm interested to pursue just for a bit the question of assimilating immigrants, partly because immigrant foodways are bound to be different because before they immigrated, they were living in very different cultures. So what was the basis for saying, Oh, you shouldn't be eating spicy food or you shouldn't be eating pickles, or whatever it might be. Was there a pseudo-scientific basis for that?

Margot Finn: Frequently, yeah. With the spicy foods and pickles there was a dominant idea that bland foods were better for you. This was largely influenced by Puritan nutritional ideology, Sylvester Graham and Harvey Kellogg probably being the most famous of the people who pushed these ideas. And it was nutritional, but it was also spiritual. It would cause people to pursue other kinds of bodily pleasures rather than focusing their minds on God and a higher power and spirituality.

There was a real concern that spicy food — this was directly laid out in a lot of their writings — that spicy foods would make people more likely to masturbate. It would excite all of these desires so that they would then do these sinful things. So that's where some of that came from.

And then it went along with attitudes towards immigrants to this general sense that they had these passions that they would pursue, that they were more lustful, possibly lazier as well. It's all the stereotypes that get applied to marginalized populations. And that was reflected in the attitudes towards the food, to the idea that they crave these exciting pickles and spicy flavors and couldn't moderate their appetites for those things the way an appropriate kind of American would do.

So the taste education that they tried to do with immigrants, to try to get them to eat these bland foods, was a way of trying to bring people together to create a common culture, but also to try and

tame these sorts of ... Sometimes they were called unnatural appetites. Other times they were portrayed as appetites that were too natural and then needed to be brought into civilization. But however they were framed, excessive and immoral kinds of behaviors that were linked to diet. And attitudes about whole national groups of people.

Ah, but that was then, I hear you say. We love immigrant food today, at least the versions that suit our taste. We don't go in for meddling with people's taste in foods any more.

Margot Finn: Now the behavior modification and the idea that we're going to improve people's behaviors through improving their eating is primarily oriented towards obesity prevention, getting people to avoid fast food and junk food with the idea that you will make them thinner. But there's often implicit ideas about how you're going to make them better citizens and really have that same kind of discipline that extends throughout their life, if you can get their eating habits in order. So there is a lot of moralization of junk food and fast food. I think that's where the attention is now, on how to change people's eating to change their other behaviors.

Jeremy: One of the accusations against junk food and industrial food is that, precisely by carefully engineering tastes, flavors, they are actually tapping into something that is maybe universal and that that's actually why people are so fond of them. Because in some strange sense, they do taste really good.

Margot Finn: I think junk foods do taste really good to a lot of people. I think they are designed in that way; that that's not wrong. But I think that's true of all kinds of foods and whether or not they're produced industrially.

I think a homemade crème brûlée hits many of the same things that any industrial fast-food dessert would, but there's more moral concern about the latter. And that suggests to me that it's not really about the fat and the sugar and what those do to how much you want to eat them, but what kinds of status the food has. I think the homemade crème brûlée just doesn't get attacked in the same way, even if it's just as delicious, addictive, whatever, if it would make you eat, even when you're not hungry, just as much as a fast food, ice cream cone would.

Jeremy: So good taste is about status.

Margot Finn: I think it's almost always inflicted by status. Yes.

Jeremy: But then the accusation of — Oh, you're a foodie — is kind of a put down. Is it a put down of high status, or is it a put down of pretentiousness?

Margot Finn: I think it's a put down of pretentiousness. From the time the word was coined, it had that sort of slur quality to it. A little bit like yuppie, right from the time that term was invented, it was pejorative. And I think that's because there is a real policing of the idea of class climbing, getting above your station, and a real discomfort with the idea that people might aspire to or perform a class above where they are. And then there's also, on the flip side, a real sense that it's quite rude to look down on other people. So even though this happens constantly, we're not comfortable with those judgments. I think both sides of it, both the pretension and also the idea of snobbery and looking down on other people, both of those are seen as things we should not do.

Jeremy: It's pretty interesting though, because when I look inside myself, I do judge what I consider to be bad taste in food, and I do think that the food I prefer is better than the food those people prefer. I know this sounds like a stupid question, but is there any sense in which you can say that good food tastes better?

Margot Finn: You mean to everybody?

Jeremy: Maybe even just to the person who's saying it? Me. You.

Margot Finn: Oh I absolutely think people can make confident pronouncements about their own taste, even if those things would change, whether over a lifetime, or quickly even. I don't think that there's a sense that I can't say yes, I prefer this or that. But to to assume that those things exist outside of me — right? — that that preference has meaning outside of me? I'm not sure why it would.

Neither am I — and yet, I can't help myself.