

TASTE, CULTURE AND HISTORY

Stephen Mennell

When we speak about cooking and eating, what do we mean by 'taste'? In everyday usage, we often use the word as though it denoted some objective quality of the food – how it 'tastes'. But when we think more closely about it, we know that what we principally mean is how people *perceive* the 'objective' quality of the food, using their 'taste buds' and their noses. Psychologists receive large grants from food manufacturers to study the perception of tastes. Indeed I remember that at one of Alan Davidson's Oxford Food Symposia back in the 1980s, one of the guest speakers was heating up flasks of chemicals over Bunsen burners in the hall of St Antony's College; one of them was supposed to be an artificial beef taste, though to me it smelled like burning rubber.

But, in talking today about 'changing tastes', we mean something more social than physiological or psychological. I take it that we are using 'taste' in the metaphorical sense in which it has come to apply to aesthetic preferences in the fields of music or pictorial art, and then returning the metaphor to the field of food and eating whence it came in the first place. We are speaking of people's food preferences, and their capacity to discriminate aesthetically between different ingredients, dishes and cuisines. 'Taste' in this sense is a part of what is now fashionably called *habitus* – that is, it is learned, not innate, but deeply habituated so that it seems to us like 'second nature'. Although our tastes have been learned or moulded since childhood, they have come to feel 'natural' or innate to us – we often find it difficult to imagine feeling different about our likes and dislikes. Although individuals may have idiosyncratic personal preferences, the broad shape of their habituated taste is likely to be shared with many other people, and it is likely to vary considerably between one culture

and another – or more concretely between different groups of people. That, I take it, is what in connection with this year's Erasmus Prize we are calling *etecultuur* or culinary culture.

If 'taste' in this sense is so deeply habituated and socially rooted, how does it come to change? For change it certainly does. I remember that it was only in 1964 that I ate my first Indian meal, in an Indian restaurant in Leeds, when Indian cuisine was unknown in my home town of Huddersfield; now there is an Indian restaurant in most large villages, let alone towns, and a politician recently said that Chicken Tikka Masala rather than roast beef was now the British national dish. It used to be said that a society's taste in food was one of the most slowly changing, most conservative, aspects of its culture. That may, at a deep level, still be true of some underlying attitudes towards eating and its pleasures but, on the surface, eating seems to have become a part of fashion, which not only changes but changes at an accelerating rate. How, if at all, can this be understood in a very long-term perspective?

IS 'TASTE' A HUMAN UNIVERSAL?

First, can we say that 'taste' is a human universal, that the capacity to discriminate between foods on the basis of social preferences has existed ever since the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, when the human species was not numerous and existed only in small foraging bands? Yes, probably, in one sense. It has been noted that no human group in normal times eats everything of potential nutritional value that is available to it in its environment. Earthworms, for instance, must be among the most widely distributed of edible fauna, but I don't know of any human group – apart from Britain's SAS special forces – where they are a normal and preferred item of diet. Mary Douglas was probably right in arguing that 'each individual, by cultural training, enters a sensory world that is presegmented and prejudged for him' (1972: 62). The propensity for humans to make patterned classifications of foods is probably universal, and of course Claude Lévi-Strauss sought to show that distinctions between the raw, the cooked and the rotten played a fundamental part in the structure

of thought. The rejection of some available foods and preference for others may have been all the more possible if, as Marshall Sahlins famously argued in *Stone-Age Economics* (1972), for early humankind food was relatively abundant and gathering it left plenty of time for leisure and reflection. On the other hand, it can be pointed out that early humans also endured levels of vulnerability and unpredictable danger – from disease, accident, natural disasters, other animals – that are almost inconceivable to modern people, and the levels of fear associated with such levels of danger probably served to minimize the foresight associated with highly developed ‘taste’. Some insight into the fierce satisfaction of appetite that may have been characteristic of such conditions may perhaps be gleaned from Ray Allen Billington’s account of fur trappers in the Rocky Mountains in the period from 1825 to 1845 – who were pursuing one of the most dangerous ways of life known to modern history:

While the ribs were sizzling, he often began his meal by drinking some of the warm blood, which he insisted tasted like milk. This might be followed by the buffalo liver, eaten raw and flavoured with the contents of the gall bladder, or by a soup made from a pound or two of rich marrow extracted from the leg bones and cooked with blood and water. This thick mixture turned the stomachs of easterners but made the faces of trappers ‘shine with grease and gladness’. The intestines were eaten next, roasted until they were puffed with heat and fat and sizzling with escaping steam. These ‘boudins’ the men slid down their throats without chewing; on occasion two trappers would start at opposite ends of a great pile of intestines and work their way to the middle, each eating faster and faster to get his share ... (1977: 38)

Whether or not early humans had well developed systems for classifying what they ate and did not eat, it should not be forgotten that these were small, local and self-sufficient bands who could only eat what was immediately available to them in their

immediate environment. They may have rejected some of what they could have eaten, but the range of comestibles would always have been far smaller than in the modern world, where foods of diverse ecological and economic provenance are traded across the whole globe, so that everything is available all the time in the great world cities for those who can afford it. A book like Alan Davidson's *North Atlantic Seafood* (1979) is symptomatic of our globalizing world, and would have been inconceivable only a few decades ago. The diet of most pre-industrial groups was rather monotonous and – by the standards of today – boring. There is a story, probably apocryphal, about an African tribe whose staple diet was millet porridge; an anthropologist is supposed to have introduced them to grilled fillet steak to see what they thought of it. They are supposed to have replied, 'Well, it's very good – but it's not as nice as millet porridge.'

INTERDEPENDENCE, STRATIFICATION AND CUISINE

My good friend Jack Goody, in his book *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), compared West African and Western European cuisines, arguing that refined and elaborate cookery or *hautes cuisines* only emerged in highly unequal and markedly stratified societies. The people he had studied as an anthropologist in West Africa lived in smaller-scale and much more egalitarian societies, where everyone ate much the same, the range of dishes was relatively limited, and eating played little part, if any, in status competition. Jack mildly criticized me, when my book *All Manners of Food* was published three years after his, for being sidetracked, as he saw it, into the relatively smaller problem of explaining how French and English tastes came to develop differently. In a way he was right, but I didn't want to write the same book as he had! But, in return, and after many years' delay, I'd like to offer a mild criticism of Jack's argument, and a modification to it as well.

I'd like to argue that a high degree of social inequality and elaborate social stratification are perhaps necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the emergence of elaborate cuisine and for culinary tastes to be increasingly in flux. For that, it is also

necessary to have long – and lengthening – chains of social interdependence. Stratification and large-scale webs of interdependence may indeed be interconnected with each other, but they are not the same things.

It isn't just elaborate social stratification that is necessary for refined and changing taste. For instance, in the European Middle Ages, before the Black Death, nutrition was very unequally distributed between members of the various estates – and that was especially true of meat, with the peasantry's diet dominated by vegetable and dairy products. The upper strata may have been less likely actually to go hungry in times of dearth, but it would appear that even the warrior aristocracy ate essentially the seasonal produce of their own land, and did not cook it by means much more elaborate than roasting and boiling. Now it is true, of course, that the manuscript recipes from a very few major courts towards the end of the Middle Ages – the *Forme of Cury* and Taillevent, for instance – show something more complicated, characterized by the use of spices and flavourings that could have reached these courts only via very long trade routes. But, significantly, there is an old debate about whether this late medieval *haute cuisine* for the very few represents a debased form, a remote echo, of the cuisine of ancient Rome, when the chains of social and economic interdependence were indeed longer and denser than they were for many centuries afterwards.

To put the point more generally, when the social divisions between strata are very deep and the interdependence between them is very unequal – when the *power* that they have over each other is very unequal – then the power and status of the upper strata is more likely to find expression in quantity than quality, in periodical displays of indiscriminate heaps of food at ceremonial banquets for instance, rather than through the quality and labour-intensiveness of the cookery.

Social competition becomes more intense, and the rate of change in 'taste' accelerates, when the strata of society become more closely and more equally interdependent. Thus, as far as we can tell, courtly cuisine did not change very quickly when an even

partially pacified warrior nobility's reference groups were other courts at a great distance. It accelerated when they began to experience the 'pressure from below' of an expanding merchant and professional bourgeois class. I agree with Jack Goody that *hautes cuisines* – which can be defined by their typical dishes requiring complex sequences of stages and considerable division of labour among kitchen staff – have tended to emerge in court societies from Ancient Egypt onwards. That appears to be true of what are now major world cuisines such as the French, Chinese and Indian. But though courts lay the foundations, the pace of change accelerates more markedly when, for whatever reason, the competitive virtuoso consumption of courts is supplanted by the commercial competition that takes place between restaurateurs using product differentiation to attract customers. In the culinary history of Western Europe we tend to point to the proliferation of restaurants in Paris after the French Revolution as a decisive step in the process. How culinary innovation and fashion spread from the high-class restaurants to the less prestigious establishments and then into the domestic kitchen can broadly be described as the 'trickle down' model. This model is not fully understood even now by food historians – there were for example always countervailing 'trickle up' elements too; Peter Scholliers is embarking on an ambitious project that will trace the links – over a 200-year period in Belgium – between the food of the nobility, of the bourgeois restaurant, and the supply system that brought food to all ranks of society.

Something else associated with the aftermath of the Revolution was the emergence of the knowledgeable gastronome, the culinary equivalent of the professional politician in the emerging bourgeois public sphere described or rediscovered by Jürgen Habermas (Mennell, 2003). I suspect Alan Davidson would hate to be even conceptually linked with politicians, but he is in many respects a descendant of Grimod de la Reynière or Brillat-Savarin.

And yet I wonder! Habermas thought that the rational public sphere of bourgeois political opinion had begun to decay at least a century ago, in favour of an unstable and incoherent public

opinion easily manipulated by the mass media and prone to volatile swings between extremes of fashion. I wonder whether the pace of change in *eetkultur* might now have reached the point where we would be tempted to describe contemporary taste as 'unstable and incoherent'? Twenty years ago, it made sense to me to study English and French culinary tastes and traditions as though they were separate though interrelated. And it made sense to work broadly within the trickle down model. Today, the diversity of ethnic influences found in the cooking and taste of all the rich countries, enmeshed as they are in worldwide food chains, makes it less certain that we can talk of national culinary cultures. In two ways we may even have reverted to a pattern reminiscent of the medieval world. First, the separate strata are now at a global level, with the rich countries looking towards each other to make sure that they are not too far out of step, while a huge gap separates them from the large part of the world's people who – even if they do not go hungry – live somewhat monotonously off the product of their own labours, and are irrelevant to the culinary consciousness of the West. Second, within the rich nations, the eating scene is reminiscent of Peter Burke's (1978) description of popular culture in the late Middle Ages. He argues that during that period, all ranks of society participated in popular culture, and that it was only with printing and more widespread literacy that the upper classes withdrew into a more exclusive high culture. Today, one might argue that all ranks participate in the fast food and manufactured food cultures, even though only the better-off come to sample elite cuisines.

In the conclusion to *All Manners of Food* (1996) I described one overall trend as being towards 'diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties'. Alan Warde (1997: 166–72) has taken issue with me on that. He argues that my evidence for the trend towards 'increasing varieties' in people's taste is entirely derived from the increasing variety of what is manufactured (I would again conceptualize that in terms of lengthening chains of interdependence), and that this does not prove that any individual people have embodied 'increasing variety' in their own tastes. The paucity of quantitative

sociological evidence should not however, in my view, lead us to deny the abundant evidence of our senses: people of the lower social ranks are eating in commercial eating-places and sampling a wider variety of cuisines that they did in previous generations. Oddly enough, Warde accused me of ignoring generational changes, whereas my argument was in fact about changes from generation to generation rather than about the tastes of particular individuals during their lifetimes – although such changes probably do take place, even if they are more difficult to document.

In relation to ‘diminishing contrasts’, Warde says that class differences are still marked – which indeed they are, if by that one means the unequal distribution of resources between the individuals whom one might survey using conventional questionnaires. But the *group* structure is now much more complex, old-style class inequalities cross-cutting with ethnicity to an extent inconceivable in Europe half a century ago, and above all cross-cutting with many different kinds of status group which are defined as much by their patterns of consumption and taste as by their disposable income. This has led to a culinary pluralism that is the counterpart of something which is more familiar in the arts: the loss of a single dominant style. Styles like the Baroque and Rococo enjoyed virtually unchallenged dominance in their age, more unchallenged indeed than the aristocratic upper classes with which they were associated. In a more problematic way so did Romanticism dominate an age and spread across the range of the arts. During the last hundred years or more, however, this stylistic unity has been lost. There is a greater diversity of tastes coexisting and competing at one time – competing more equally, again like classes and interests in society. There is a rapid succession of fashions in artistic styles. And the mixture of elements deriving from several styles is common: the label *Kitsch* is often applied to at least some such mixtures (Elias, 1998).

It is a reflection of my own taste that I am not very enthusiastic about so-called fusion food. When I lived in Australia, I noticed that it has become almost politically incorrect for restaurants to serve food that is recognizably and exclusively in a European

tradition. It isn't true that the Australian national dish is now meat pies with lemongrass – I made that one up – but I have dined out for years with my (true) account of a meal served by Dutch caterers at NIAS, Wassenaar, in 1988: *kipfilet* (chicken breast) surmounted by a slice of Brie, accompanied by sauerkraut mixed with mangoes and lychees.

Obviously that dish was made possible by long chains of interdependence, but also by a loosening of the model-setting centres for taste which would previously have judged such a combination to be incongruous. But I would also add that the sheer pace of change itself probably means that incongruity appears and disappears before the arbiters of taste – such as they still are – have a chance to label it incongruous. We shall never again see the codification of high culinary taste in coherent systems such as those represented by say, Carême, Escoffier or (to a lesser extent) by the *nouvelle cuisiniers* of the 1960s – although we may still have to endure for some time the unanimous view that all one's food should be piled up in the middle of the plate in a one great heap.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Billington, Ray Alan 1977 *America's Frontier Culture: Three Essays*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Burke, Peter 1978 *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London: Temple Smith
- Davidson, Alan 1979 *North Atlantic Seafood*. London: Macmillan.
- Douglas, Mary 1972 'Deciphering a Meal'. *Daedalus*, 101 (1) 61–81.
- Elias, Norbert 1998 'The Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch', pp. 26–35 in Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell, eds, *The Norbert Elias Reader: A Biographical Selection*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Goody, Jack 1982 *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mennell, Stephen 1996 [1985] *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Second edition, with new Afterword, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Mennell, Stephen 2003 'Eating out in the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', pp. 245–60 in Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers, eds, *Eating Out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining and Snacks since the Late Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Berg.
- Sahlins, Marshall 1972 *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine–Atherton.
- Warde, Alan 1997 *Consumption, Food and Taste*. London: Sage.