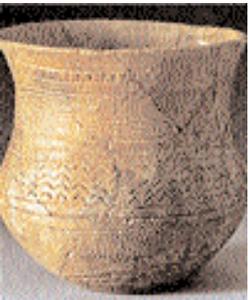


# A Brief Cultural History of Taste

## Eating – Physiological Need and Cultural Manifestation (Part 1):



Much of the history of mankind is a history of eating and taste. Yet at the same time, eating and food preparation have always been a cultural manifestation. In this series of articles, we want to take a closer look at this cultural history of taste, the techniques that were developed over the course of time to improve taste, the discovery of spices and herbs, and finally modern food technology.

### Good taste

There's no question about it. Patrons who leave a gourmet restaurant that features international cuisine have not only satisfied their hunger, they have usually just experienced an absolute gustatory delight. There's no question about it? While mankind has come up with all kinds of ideas for good eating and drinking over the course of its history, throughout the ages the peoples of the world have never been able to agree on a consistent answer to the question of what tastes better. Although all people are more or less identical in terms of their physiology, not everyone perceives all foods as being equally good tasting. In dealing with the question of "good taste," sociologists and anthropologists primarily look at social and cultural influences. The nobility in Europe, for example, was driven by a desire to set themselves apart from the lower classes through gluttony and extravagance in their diets. This was one of the key dri-

ving forces behind the significant advances in European cuisine. While the nobility in those days used to eat vast amounts of meat – consisting primarily of game or fowl roasted over an open fire – the daily diet of the lower classes frequently consisted of only simple soups or a bland gruel made from grain.

Much earlier, though, other cultures had been familiar with food preparation techniques that were unknown in Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Much that had already pampered the palates of ancient Greek or Roman epicureans had fallen into oblivion. However in other cultures, too, the history of taste was by no means a continuous, uninterrupted refinement into increasingly "finer" pleasures. Why? Fine cuisine could only develop where there was a certain abundance of foodstuffs – at least among the upper classes. However the food supply could fluctuate wildly as a result of climatic changes, natural disasters, crop failures, wars and epidemics. Another example of discontinuous development: The first restaurants were established in China during the 11th century. At the time, the country had been experiencing a sustained period of prosperity, while in recent times it was not possible to provide a sufficient supply of food for the rapidly growing population.

### The civilization of taste in Europe

But back to the ancient world. Much knowledge was lost again after the fall of the Roman Empire. At the same time, trade largely came to a standstill, which meant that both the nobility and the other classes could only feed themselves on what the respective region had to offer. The chief difference between the classes during the early Middle Ages was that the nobility enjoyed the privilege of hunting. Although their cuisine

was not any more sophisticated or finer than that of the peasants and craftsmen, it was merely characterized by the fact that enormous amounts of meat were consumed. And there was a clear ranking between the various types of meat. The most highly prized meats were game, peacock or pheasant, as well as other wild birds. Then came various varieties of poultry. At the bottom of the scale was pork, which was usually scorned by the nobility. On the other hand – especially in northern Europe – pork served as a major staple for the lower classes, such as peasants and craftsmen.

The second staple during this age was grain – in the form of either bread or gruel. While the nobility wanted white bread from well-milled wheat, the bread for the lower classes contained a great deal of bran and was made from less "valuable" grains, such as rye or barley, and occasionally even oats. Yet even this simple bread involved added "cost," as the nobility owned the grain mills, and usually the baking ovens as well, and charged dearly for milling and baking. So the typical diet of the poor consisted of grain gruel cooked in milk or even only in water.

The peasants who could afford it, as well as the more well to do craftsmen, on the other hand, were occasionally able to enjoy meat or bacon – usually as a garnish in soups. However since only one hearth was available, the meat or bacon had to be cooked in a hanging pot above the fire. Added to this were coarsely crushed grains, legumes or leek, onion, garlic and other regional vegetables. However the selection of vegetables that were available in those days was extremely limited. All that was additionally available were mangold and various varieties of turnip and cabbage.



And these "lower" (because they grew close to the ground) vegetables, too, were scorned by the nobility. Fruit that grew on trees, on the other hand, was also included in the diets of the nobility. The chief beverage for all of the classes consisted of beer or wine – depending upon the region – which was consumed in what would be considered enormous quantities by today's standards.

The further development of the cultural history of cuisine through to the late Middle Ages was governed by a number of new factors. On the one hand, there was a marked increase in trade and travel, especially from the 11th century onward (the Hansa in northern Europe, for example, and the port cities of Upper Italy), new cities were being founded, and an urban middle class gradually developed. On the other hand, the food supply improved significantly for the lower classes in many regions of Europe, prompting the nobility – which had gained in influence and wealth as a result of the centralization of power – to use such luxury goods as precious spices from India to set themselves apart from the lower classes. The most common of these spices included ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, saffron and, of course, pepper. Although no exact figures about quantities are available, individual lists of the enormous volumes of spices that were used at banquets allow the conclusion to be drawn that the courtly chefs strongly over-seasoned their foods. However something akin to a medieval cuisine did develop, including handwritten cookbooks that circulated among the chefs.

The monasteries, which formed a second, independent branch of medieval cuisine, played an important go-between role. Because not just the monks were fed here, but the needy, guests and travelers as well, a repository of independent knowledge was created – especially since numerous monks came from noble houses and did not wish to forego good food. While the courtly nobility spurned domestic herbs and preferred to demonstrate its power and wealth with exotic spices, knowledge about natural herbs for medicinal and culinary purposes enjoyed a revival in the monasteries. And the monks increasingly refined their art and passed on their knowledge, especially with respect to other ingredients, cooking techniques, winemaking and beer brewing. What also typified the cuisine of both the monasteries and the nobility during this age were the numerous fasting rules that existed, which placed restrictions on the foods that were allowed to be eaten during a large portion of the year. However these rules were often interpreted quite liberally, even by the monks. So while only fish, and no meat, was supposed to be eaten on fast days, it soon required only a little bit of rhetorical talent to include waterfowl among the foods that could be eaten on fast days.

In contrast to the many misconceptions that exist about hard-to-digest, overly fatty nutrition, late medieval cuisine was in fact quite low in fat – at least among the upper classes. A great many sweet-and-sour sauces were employed, which were made from sour cider, young wine or vinegar sweetened with honey, for example. The sauces were thickened with bread crusts, crushed almonds or occasionally eggs. Meat or vegetables were usually roasted or cooked extremely long at low heat – not in the least because the hearths in those days were not capable of producing higher temperatures.

### **The democratization of taste**

Further developments during the late Middle Ages and the transition to the modern age were characterized by highly differing factors. Beginning around the 14th century, there was a dramatic rise in crop failures and famines throughout all of Europe. Food supplies deteriorated significantly. Only the higher nobility was still able to afford major luxuries. At the same time, though, a more self-assured and prosperous middle class emerged. Enlightened thinking began to spread, and the European powers – led first and foremost by Portugal and Spain initially – set out to conquer colonies for their exploitation.

In the wake of these numerous famines, epidemics – like the plague – spread across vast areas of Europe, decimating the population. At the same time, the age of colonization set in – more or less "by chance," by the way. The driving force: The desire to exploit the riches of India and China – consisting primarily of spices – and to discover new sea routes. The discovery of America late in the 15th century afforded the subsequent colonial powers the opportunity of breaking the monopoly that the original growing areas had enjoyed in spices, tea, coffee or sugar. The European trading companies established huge plantations in their colonies for the cultivation of these coveted plants.

This development increased the supply of these former luxury articles in Europe. They also became affordable for the aspiring middle classes, which also profited handsomely from flourishing trade. This enabled the middle classes to follow in the footsteps of the nobility with respect to cooking as well. This development was fostered by the invention of modern printing in 1450. It was now possible for cookbooks, too, to be printed and circulated. It was the beginning of a "democratization of taste." As a direct result of this development, the nobility was again forced to find new ways of setting themselves apart from

the middle classes. So courtly cuisine no longer revolved around huge quantities and costly spices, but focused on ingeniously preparing rare, and therefore valuable, domestic ingredients. The chefs went on to be held in high esteem and frequently gained quite some wealth. Meals were now less opulent, being characterized instead by "exquisite taste." Since the French Revolution, at the latest, the middle classes were no longer bound by any restrictions; many of the courtly chefs in France went into business for themselves after their noble masters had gone into exile.

### **The first signs of modern food technology**

In addition to the spread of "colonial goods" and the political upheavals in Europe, the "democratization of taste" was further spurred on by numerous technological innovations in the 19th century. This initially began in agriculture, where new technologies were producing better and better yields. It continued with the emergence of a canning industry and new industrially prepared products for the modern kitchen. The canning industry had initially begun on a very small scale in home kitchens. In Germany, for example, vegetable farmers around the city of Braunschweig were the first to utilize the invention of the tin can.

The beginnings of one part of the modern food industry were marked by both the rise of the natural sciences as well as by the military necessities of the First World War. Since there was a need to provide sufficient nutrition for large armies in the field, there was a desire for nutrition in concentrated form. The result: The invention of pea soup concentrate ("pea sausage"). This also served as the backdrop for the development of meat extract. Chemist Justus von Liebig's intention had been to use meat extract to improve the nutrition of the poor and ill. In 1848, his student Max Pettenkofer began producing small quantities of this extract. In 1863, final-

ly, Hamburg engineer Georg Christian Giebert secured the rights to the process and launched the industrial production of "Liebig's Meat Extract" in cattle-rich Uruguay. Although the nutritional expectations failed to materialize, this meat extract went on to enjoy a career as a base for broths and as a flavor enhancer for soups and sauces.

In 1883, Swiss grain merchant Julius Maggi first brought to market his "soup blocks," consisting of ground legumes seasoned with salt and herbs. In 1887, the young company succeeded in developing Maggi Seasoning, which was produced solely from vegetable ingredients and served the same purpose as Liebig's Meat Extract, only at a much lower price. Carl Heinrich Knorr, finally, was the third to enjoy success with similar products around the same time.

Mention should also be made of the technique of pasteurization, for example, which stemmed from the work of Louis Pasteur of France and kept milk or fruit juices, for example, from spoiling, as well as the first major attempts to preserve foods with ice. There was no longer any stopping the march of modern technologies in food processing. The main objective: To enable foods to be kept better and for longer periods of time, to preserve or even enhance their nutritional value, and of course to preserve their taste and appetizing appearance. A major role in this connection was played by an increasingly better knowledge of the individual ingredients and the taste-producing substances in a food in order to be able to replace any nutritional and flavoring substances which might have been lost during processing.

And now the historical development comes full circle: While medieval cuisine, all in all, was not very balanced and the nutritional value of the ingredients that were employed in it was significantly reduced as a result of excessive cooking times, modern cuisine, both in gastro-

nomy as well as in the industrial preparation of foods, is attaching increasing importance to wholesome products and healthy nutrition. So this development not only led to an increasing refinement of taste, but also to gentler ways of dealing with the nutritional value of the ingredients employed in the foods. The "nouvelle cuisine" of France and the "new German cuisine" represent the epitome of this trend thus far in the field of haute cuisine. And the food industry has also adopted much of this culinary knowledge in recent times. In contrast to the prejudices that exist, much industrially processed food is therefore more nutritious than many of the dishes prepared at home using grandmother's recipes with their long cooking times.