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Tasting as a social practice: a methodological experiment in making taste public

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork in the UK and Portugal, this paper considers the relationships between cultural analyses of taste and the embodied activity of tasting. As part of a wider project on the multiple ontologies of 'freshness', the paper conceptualises taste as an emergent effect of tasting practices. Drawing on evidence from a series of 'tasting events' (where research participants were recorded shopping, cooking and eating a meal with friends and family), the paper explores the multiple dimensions of taste concluding that even the most personal and sensory aspects of tasting food involve a social dimension which we interpret through the lens of practice theory. The paper identifies three specific dimensions of tasting as a social practice involving food's material and visceral qualities; the links between embodiment and emotion; and the contextual significance of family and social relations. Our findings contribute to recent debates about 'making taste public', even in the apparently private context of household consumption.

Keywords: Food, taste, social practice, UK, Portugal

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Introduction

This paper draws on our recent fieldwork in the UK and Portugal to reflect on the multiple dimensions of taste and on the experience of tasting as a social practice. Conceptualising 'taste' has been a major challenge for the social sciences as well as for other fields such as gastronomy and neuroscience. Within the social sciences, some have emphasised the role of taste as a marker of distinction, as in Bourdieu's (1984) classic work on the taste preferences of different social (class) groups, while others have emphasised the embodied activity of tasting, as in the recent turn to various forms of 'sensuous scholarship' (Stoller 2010). Following Bourdieu, sociologists have conventionally approached *taste* as a matter of how aesthetic judgements, preferences and lifestyles vary according to the distribution of economic, social and cultural capital (cf. Bennett et al. 2009). While this approach applies to all forms of cultural consumption, food arguably invites a unique focus on the embodied experience of *tasting* (cf. Abbots & Lavis 2013).[1]

There are, indeed, myriad approaches to the 'science of taste' that focus on the physiological, gustatory and psychological dimensions of food, the subjects that perceive and eat it, and the bodies that mediate this encounter. The number of disciplines with a stake in this field has given rise to the kind of terminological conundrums that we explore below. It also confirms the veracity of Korsmeyer's observation that 'taste […] the sense, its objects, its activities […] are too complex to be considered from any single perspective' (1999: 2). With few exceptions, however, the interplay between the taste of food (experienced at an individual level) and social differences in the experience of tasting is poorly understood. This neglect, argue Teil and Hennion (2004), obscures the reality of taste, erasing the 'heterogeneity of the elements' involved in its formation and wider effects – including the material and chemical attributes of food, the individual and cultural position of the taster, and the circumstances surrounding the activity of tasting. Our argument in this paper (following Højlund 2015) is that by attending to tasting as a shared, cultural activity, experienced during the practice of eating together, there is significant potential to address the social dimensions of taste and tasting.

[1] In a later work, Abbots (2017) focuses on eating as an embodied experience, mediating and mediated by the relationship between food's matter and meaning. Her approach raises important questions of embodiment and power, knowledge and values, including whether agency can be located in the materiality of food itself.

Literature review and conceptual framework

In discussing taste and tasting from a geographical and sociological perspective, we are aware of the wider literature from neurogastronomy and related approaches. This literature asks 'how the brain creates flavor and why it matters' (Shepherd 2012), also addressing more specific topics such as the scientific basis of our sense of smell and its connections to notions of desire and disgust (Herz 2007). The range of disciplines that have an interest in taste and tasting also helps explain what Hedegaard has called the 'terminological conundrums' that beset the encounter between gastronomy and science. In the natural sciences, Hedegaard (2019) suggests, 'taste' is basically understood in terms of the interplay between the physical-chemical properties of food and processes of multi-sensory integration in the brain. In the social sciences, by contrast, conceptions of taste range from Bourdieu's analyses of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984) to a view of taste as something that is publicly shared (Højlund 2015). Recent work has also shown how sensory perceptions of taste go beyond the chemical properties of foodstuffs, involving concepts such as 'mouthfeel' and 'palatability' (cf. Mouritsen & Styrbæk 2017). We take these arguments forward in our empirical work, discussed later in the paper, being careful to distinguish different uses of terms such as sensory, visceral and embodied.[2]

The paper takes its cue from recent work that has emphasised the social and cultural significance of taste and tasting for understanding the relations between humans and the food they eat. This work includes the various contributions to Counihan and Højlund's (2018) collection *Making Taste Public* which establishes an agenda for exploring how social relations both shape and are shaped by the activity of tasting food. Their agenda challenges existing work which has either approached taste as an innate property of food or in terms of individual responses that may or may not be conditioned by 'cultural context'.

Conceptualising taste as an emergent effect of tasting practices has much in common with a growing body of work within social and cultural geography that focuses on food. This research explores how

[2] We have sought to be consistent in using 'sensory' to apply to the physical senses through which our minded bodies encounter food, 'visceral' to refer to the bodily realm where feelings, sensations and moods are experienced – sometimes quite abruptly - and 'embodied' to refer to the multiple bodily sensations through which we experience food, combining specific senses such as sight, smell and taste (cf. Hayes-Conroy 2010: 734.)

'things' – plants and animals – *become* 'food' (Roe 2006, Wilbur & Gibbs 2020) and how the edibility and other attributes of novel foods are established (Waitt 2014, Sexton 2018, House 2019). These processes are acknowledged to be relational, involving multiple human and non-human actors, experienced through an embodied and visceral engagement with food. This conceptualization of taste and tasting involves an appreciation of 'viscerally aware' research practices (cf. Sexton et al. 2017) and a commitment to sensory – principally ethnographic – methods, acknowledging the limitations of 'textual' methods and the need for researchers to 'think with all our senses' (Back 2007: 8, see also Stoller 1989, Pink 2015).

Our work also attends to the literature on food's synaesthetic properties, where the stimulation of one sense or cognitive pathway leads to the stimulation of another (cf. Seremetakis 1994, Sutton 2001). We refer to this process, below, in terms of 'tasting with the eyes', where the taste of food is anticipated by visual inspection prior to ingestion. It is also relevant when tasting food evokes powerful memories or other emotions (as we have discussed elsewhere: Meah & Jackson 2016).

We draw inspiration from earlier methodological contributions to the field of taste and tasting. These include Brady's (2011) discussion of 'cooking as inquiry', where she used a combination of auto-ethnography and collective biography to explore how our embodied selves are relationally performed or 'made social' through food-making. Other studies have emphasised the role of cooking and eating as a way of feeling 'at home' among migrant communities in New Zealand (Longhurst et al. 2009), thinking 'through the body' via sensory engagements with the material and discursive environment. In the same context, Longhurst et al. (2008) shared lunch with their research participants, exploring feelings of desire and disgust over the combination of sweet and spicy food. Their research encompassed bodily reflections, gestures, physical presence, the smell of bodies, tone of voice and comportment, also paying attention to their own experience of smell, touch and feelings as reflexive researchers. In her work on Slow Food in California and Nova Scotia, Hayes-Conroy (2010) shared meals at home and in restaurants with movement members, participated in cooking, gardening, food shopping and farm stays, interned as a restaurant cook, and went on neighbourhood tours and wine tasting events among other activities. Adopting similar methods to those described below, Hayes-Conroy and Sweet (2015) used conversational interviews and communal cooking and eating events to examine the social and environmental imaginaries

of displaced women in Medellín, Colombia, arguing that these imaginaries are 'crafted out of material processes and are felt viscerally (in the body) at the same time as being shared collectively' (2015: 377).

A key reference point for our research is Mann et al.'s (2011) ethnographic experiment of 'mixing methods, tasting fingers' which emphasises that tasting need not be understood as an activity confined to the mouth and tongue, involving all the senses. Further insights are provided by Højlund's (2018) analysis of sensory skills among Danish school children who view sound as an important part of tasting food and who taste with the eyes and fingers as they prepare to eat. These studies attend to the public nature of taste, showing that as people eat together, so too do they taste together. Further, these studies show that 'tasting' is not restricted to the moment of eating but extends both prior to and after the meal-time event. Taking a cue from these developments, this paper addresses some of the methodological implications of the injunction to 'make taste public' (Counihan & Høyland 2018), focusing on the shared tasting practices of our research participants when eating together with family and friends.

From this diverse literature we propose a conceptual framework for our own research. This entails a commitment to the multi-sensory nature of taste and tasting, observed at first hand to access the embodied qualities of food, expressed through verbal and non-verbal cues. We seek to explore the shared and social experience of tasting food rather than focusing on individual taste sensations. Specifically, we have found it useful to analyse our findings through a social practice lens. Social practice theory has been widely employed in consumption research, as discussed by Warde (2005, 2014) and others. The theory focuses on practices (such as cooking or eating) as the unit of analysis rather than individuals, discourses or social structures (Reckwitz 2002). Practice theory emphasises the routines and rhythms through which ordinary everyday practices are performed and reproduced. Such practices are often bundled together with other practices and enabling technologies so that, for example, the practice of eating (as explored by Warde 2016) relies on the practice of supermarket shopping which, in turn, relies on car-borne transportation, cold-chain technologies, and both industrial and domestic refrigeration.

Research design and methodology

The remainder of this paper presents evidence from a number of 'tasting events' where research participants were recorded shopping, cooking and eating a meal with friends and family. These tasting events were an experimental component of a wider study of how 'freshness' is enacted in relation to the production and consumption of food in the UK and Portugal.[3] The 'experiment' was prompted by the comparative nature of our work, including the observation that British understandings of 'food' and 'taste' did not easily equate with Portuguese terms such as *alimentação/comida* and *gosto/sabor*.

The wider study focused on certain commodity sectors (fruit and vegetables, chicken and fish) which were of interest in relation to the processes that constitute what Freidberg (2009) describes as 'industrial freshness' where foods that are marketed as pure and natural have often undergone extensive scientific and technological processes in getting them to market. Our project began by engaging with major retailers in the UK and Portugal, carrying out interviews with around 25 technologists, buyers, category managers and product developers, together with first-hand observation during site visits. We then worked backwards along the supply chain, carrying out further site visits and observations (on farms, at distributions centres, in processing facilities and at transport hubs) to explore how freshness is secured 'from farm to fork'. Parallel to this, we interviewed and observed around 20 smaller-scale producers and retailers located in traditional markets or 'alternative' food networks as well as the trade associations that represent them. The findings of these initial stages of the research have been presented elsewhere (Evans et al. 2019, Jackson et al. 2019, Truninger et al. 2020).

Our work with food retailers and their suppliers revealed the commercial significance of food qualities such as freshness which we theorised in terms of their multiple ontologies (Jackson et al. 2019).[4] Our analysis of 'freshness' in the commercial sphere confirmed the comments that others have made about taste – for example, that it is not a stable or innate attribute of food (Teil & Hennion 2004) and that it is a

[3] Funded by ESRC (ES/N009649/1).

[4] A multiple ontologies approach insists that the various dimensions of 'freshness' (recently harvested, not frozen or highly processed, good tasting etc.) are not simply different representations of essentially the same thing but are ontologically distinct (referring to different material properties or things). While this approach draws on Mol's inspirational work on atherosclerosis in *The Body Multiple* (2002), in our work it leads to an analysis of the way 'freshness' is enacted or performed and to the various effects or consequences of these enactments.

consequence of specific tasting practices (Højlund 2018). Our work also recalls Gross' questions about how a single taste descriptor such as 'fresh' can refer to such a multiplicity of tastes and to the cultural activity of tasting (2018: 199). In the final phase of our research (the focus of the current paper), we sought to understand the social and cultural significance of these ideas at the domestic scale.

In working with consumers, we anticipated that these tasting practices might include facial expressions and bodily dispositions as well as paralinguistic cues such as those outlined by Wiggins (2002) in her discussion of gustatory 'umms'. Further, we were interested in how people eat together, taste together and collectively enact freshness. To pursue these interests, we organised a number of 'tasting events', observing the practices of preparing and eating a meal in people's own homes.

This final research phase involved intensive work with consumers to explore how 'freshness' features in domestic food practices related to shopping, cooking, eating, storing and disposing of food. A range of qualitative methods was used including repeat in-depth interviews (some of which involved multiple members of the same household), shopping 'go-alongs' (cf. Kusenbach 2003) and kitchen visits to observe food practices *in situ*, and the collection of photographic and other visual data, culminating in the tasting events that provide the empirical basis of this paper. Given the intensive nature of the research, we worked with a small group of households: two in the UK and four in Portugal, involving 36 participants in total (see Table 1). Participants were recruited through existing social networks including friends and friends-of-friends, workmates and their associates, and families with whom we had worked before. They were selected for their diversity in terms of age, social class and household composition rather than as a statistically representative sample of UK or Portuguese households. The shopping 'go-alongs' were audio-recorded on digital devices while the cooking and eating events were video-recorded. The recordings were transcribed in full and analysed using NVivo software. Detailed field notes and photographs were also taken for subsequent discussion by the research team.

The tasting events were designed to observe the *practices* of shopping, cooking and eating rather than relying on verbal accounts derived from interview data alone.[5] Our participants were invited to host a

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[5] In her account of dish-washing and related domestic practices, Martens comments that 'talk is good for getting at the organisational dimensions of dish washing, but not so good for getting at *activity*' (Martens 2012: 4.3).

meal consisting of several courses. They were then observed shopping for and preparing the meal, including a video-recording of the meal itself. While participants were aware of our interest in 'freshness', this was not the focus of the event. Rather, our observations focused on how people conduct themselves in everyday domestic settings as well as 'what people talk about when they talk about food' (Ferguson 2014). In most cases, the events were hosted by one or more of our research participants, while one was hosted by a member of the research team (see Fig. 1).

While some aspects of the tasting events were (to varying degrees) 'staged' for our benefit, others followed participants' regular routines such as Ruby and Ellis's 'weekly ritual' of inviting friends round for dinner on Friday evenings. The 'staging' of events was most obvious when participants made knowing references to 'freshness', aware that this was the subject of our research, or when they deliberately 'spoke to camera' at various stages in preparing the meal. So, for example, Ted's self-recorded video of his meal preparation includes numerous episodes, taken over several days, where he would begin a new segment with a short address to camera ('Welcome back…'). We maintain that these ironic interludes highlight the reflexive nature of the research process rather than invalidating our findings by revealing their artificiality. They are part of our ongoing relationship with our participants, an essential aspect of our ethical agreement with them in terms of securing and maintaining their informed consent.

The following sections draw out some of the key themes in our research findings. They relate to our earlier conceptual argument about the embodied, sensory and visceral nature of cooking and eating as well as their shared, routine and conventional character as social practices. The empirical discussion is presented in three parts focusing on food's material and visceral qualities; the links between embodiment and emotion; and the contextual significance of family and social relations. We begin with some reflections on food's materiality and our participants' visceral response to specific kinds of food.

Materiality and viscerality

Some foods seem to trigger a more immediate reaction among our participants than others. Their response relates in part to the food's material properties and to its real or imagined ability to provoke a visceral reaction when eaten. In one case, for example, the taste of padrón peppers was appreciated in

anticipation of their actual consumption (even when, through an oversight, they were not actually served or eaten). While at the supermarket, buying ingredients for the meal, Ted asked Angela. if she had ever had them, saying that: 'They're brilliant. They've a fantastic taste'. The conversation continued:

Ted: They're famous in Spain and when you pick them…

Angela: Are they like chillies?

Ted: That's the thing. They're fairly mild but every one in 50 is shit hot. [Angela laughs] Like a Scotch bonnet, wooowww! [Angela laughs again] and you can't tell by the look of them, so it's quite exciting.

It is not clear, in this extract, whether Ted's comment on their 'fantastic taste' refers to the flavour of the peppers or to the wider visceral experience of eating them. But there is a tangible excitement in anticipation of the tasting experience (not knowing what to expect, with the potential for surprise and a sense of risk). The social context is also significant, with Ted sharing his culinary knowledge and experience with the researcher, their mutual laughter revealing the rapport they have established over several years prior research.[6]

Also while out shopping, Ted sampled some Kalamata olives: 'Let's see', he says, reading the label, 'what have they got, raspberry vinegar, lemon and what?' Tasting one, he uttered an appreciative 'mmm', giving one to Angela to try who added her own affirmative 'Mmmm! Mmm … oh bloody hell, they're nice'. In this case, the shared nature of taste is made public in Ted and Angela's combined utterances as the tasting is done collaboratively.

While preparing food for the tasting event, we observed Ted perusing a written dinner plan, desalinating salt-cod for the starter (which involved changing the water three times a day for 48 hours) and preparing the tuna (which he described as 'reassuringly expensive') for the main course. This was a very embodied process involving repeated finger-licking and smelling ingredients. Making the cod-ball starter, Ted blended the ingredients with a pestle which he licked like an ice-cream cone and observed: 'Mmmm,

6 We have written elsewhere about the significance of laughter and different kinds of humour in food-related research (Jackson &Meah 2019).

lovely … looking forward to that'. Similarly, when the tuna *daube* was served, Jonathan (Ted's son) put his nose to the casserole dish and inhaled, making multiple approving 'Mmms'.[7] Paralleling Sutton and Seremitakis's arguments about synaesthesia (referred to above), the activity of tasting food in this extract is based on the combination of a range of sensory inputs. It is a shared experience between father and son, and it relies on both verbal and non-verbal expressions.

The material properties of food were evoked at numerous points in the process of meal planning and preparation. For example, while out shopping before her tasting event, Ruby spent some time selecting the steak, reaching to the back of the supermarket shelves and looking for the right level of marbling and fat content on the meat. Rubbing her fingers and thumbs together, she struggled to find the right word to describe the preferred consistency of the steak: 'soft, less chewy'. When asked if she meant 'tender', she replied: 'Yeah, that's the word'. She took a similar approach when shopping for tomatoes, searching for ones that had the right consistency. Examining some vine-ripened tomatoes, she pressed them gently and said: 'Yeah, that's more ripe, they feel more squashy than them other ones [sic]'. Our field observations include multiple examples of participants squeezing food to judge its firmness, smelling cheese to see if it is sufficiently ripe and looking carefully for blemishes or other signs of deterioration on fruit and vegetables (see Fig. 2). Sometimes, these qualities are hard to express in words. When making bread, for example, Ted described how the yeast 'thrutches up' when left in the fridge overnight.

These examples confirm the significance of sensory and visceral experience in the judgment of specific foods regarding their taste and texture. But they also demonstrate the challenges involved in 'making taste public' where the exact words are lacking to convey the intangible qualities of food.

At the dinner hosted by one of the research team, Mónica brought to the table a dessert of pineapple in cubes mixed with shredded mint (see Fig. 3). Eating the first spoonfuls did not provoke an immediate response. But, after talking about olives and olive oil and the difficulty of finding fresh bottled milk in Portuguese supermarkets, a conversation ensued about the many varieties of fish on Portuguese restaurant menus, the differences between fresh and cold-water varieties, and the material properties of mint and its associations with freshness. Mia explained that: 'Talking about the word fresh itself, I

[7] Compare Wiggins (2002) on the social significance of (various kinds of) gustatory 'mmms'.

wouldn't associate it with temperature… of course you see a lot of chewing gum or mints that will be called fresh'. Mónica interrupts: 'Yes, that is why mint is here on this pineapple!' Nick: 'Aha! So you would expect us to have a spoon and immediately go 'Wow! This is fresh!'' [laughter]. Mia continues to explain that 'Mint, as a taste, it refreshes the palate, actually so does pineapple, it is a very neutralizing palate cleanser', and Hannah chips in: 'It was no accident this combination was here then! [laughter]'.[8] In this case, the exchange between Mia and Hannah helps clarify the way taste is 'made public' through the social practice of eating and sharing food. What might have been an ephemeral experience for either individual, tasting alone, takes on additional significance when their taste sensations are exchanged and compared. To the best of our knowledge, these issues have not been discussed at length in previous food studies literature or in the growing body of work on sensory or embodied geographies of food.

The material properties of dried (salted) cod arose in conversations among the British participants at this meal, revealing a paradox of freshness (where the fish's 'freshness' emerges during the process of cooking):

> Mia: That's the thing with *bacalhau* [cod fish], for me. You know, it couldn't be a less fresh product in terms of the way… a long time cured, a lot of curing the product. But then if it's been cooked freshly that day…
>
> Hannah: That's a fresh meal!
>
> Mia: That's fresh, yeah!

In one of the meals held in the Algarve, hosted by Alberto and his friends, cuttlefish was served having been bought from the market that morning. While gently pressing the dorsal region of the fish at the fishmonger's, Alberto explained that when cuttlefish is fresh it changes colour when touched, the changing colour being a clear sign of its freshness. It is also a sign that the cuttlefish is 'alive' and fresh, meaning that it was caught not long ago (possibly during the very early hours of that day). When tasting

[8] It may be significant (as one of our referees suggested) that mint is a trigeminal stimulant, affecting the ophthalmic, maxillary and mandibular nerves which together create sensations in the face and mouth – but we do not have the expertise to pursue this argument further.

the dish, one participant emphasised how 'tasty and fresh' it was, judged at the moment of purchase and when eaten during the meal. These spatially and temporally dispersed aspects of taste and tasting deserve more attention than they have so far received from food scholars. The shared (public) nature of the discussion, as well as the embodied performance of taste and tasting, helped clarify the food's sensory qualities including the ambiguities of 'freshness'.

Embodiment and emotion

Some foods evoke embodied sensations and provoke a strong emotional or physical response as Sutton (2001) explored in his work on food and memory among migrants from the Greek Island of Kalymnos. The same was true of our research in the UK and Portugal. One dish, in particular, provoked an extreme reaction from Ted's son Jonathan. For dessert, Ted served a dish of orange segments soaked in honey and orange water. By the time the dish was served, however, the honey had soaked through the fruit making the oranges taste extremely tart. Jonathan's initial reaction was disappointed: 'It doesn't taste of anything'. Then, he grimaced and called out 'Get some sugar on it!'. Once the liquor was stirred up thoroughly, Jonathan was able to appreciate the sharpness of the oranges with the sweetness of the honey, communicated with mumbled approval, nodding gestures and agreeable facial expressions. This example also demonstrates the way different sensory inputs are integrated (as discussed by Mouritsen & Styrbæk (2017) in relation to the complex issue of 'mouthfeel').

Our UK fieldwork suggests that some bodily sensations were engaged more directly, or more frequently, than others. For example, apart from a reference to the squid 'smelling like the sea' when Ruby was cutting the fish, there was not much further discussion during that meal of food's olfactory qualities. Smell was more prominent at Ted's dinner with comments on the 'lovely nutmeggy smell' of cinnamon in the dessert. Rather that engaging individual senses separately, we found multiple examples of different senses being engaged almost simultaneously, which we came to refer to as 'seeing with the fingers' and 'tasting with the eyes' (cf. Back 2007). There are numerous examples in the literature, where an embodied

sense of smell or taste evokes powerful emotions that are best described as visceral.[9] A striking example is Heldke's (2016) account of how the smell of cinnamon rolls evoked such powerful memories of her recently deceased father that she was forced to leave the coffee shop and go to the bathroom to collect herself. Heldke describes the sensation as 'a fist-in-the-chest blow', causing a wave of grief so intense that it could only be called physical (ibid.: 87).

An appreciation of food's visceral qualities can be hard to express in words. For example, the following exchange occurred between Ted's son Jonathan and his grandson William while the participants were tasting some chorizo, made from an acorn-fed pig:

William: Oh nice!

Angela: Really? How does it taste different, William, to what you normally have?

William sat back in his chair, thinking and chewing another piece. William's mother Polly asked him to describe the difference and he seemed lost for words, eventually suggesting that 'It's more richer' [sic], to which Jonathan added: 'Sweeter, a bit sweeter'. In this example, taste emerges not as something that is experienced at a purely individual level, but expressed in a collective way through the shared process of trying to describe an unfamiliar food. Though clearly a bodily sensation, provoked by chewing and savouring the richness of the food, taste here is also public in the sense that it is out in the open and subject to discussion (in this case within an intimate family setting).[10]

Likewise, during the cooking of Ruby's meal, there were several occasions when participants struggled to express food's qualities in words. In one case, for example, Elsa looked at a bowl of salsa and said: 'It looks fresh, it all looks really, um… it makes me think … of the flavours, of the taste… fresh, if that makes sense, so it's like, I don't know, the colours, I think it's the colours, I'm very drawn to … food that's colourful'. Elsa later says: 'It's hard to put into words, it's a feeling that you have about it, and … mm, yeah, I guess I've never thought in that way'

9 Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy define viscerality as referring to the realm of internally-felt sensations, moods and states of being which are born from sensory engagement with the material world (2008: 462).

10 This example also shows that the distinction between public and private is a fairly arbitrary one, blurring he conventional distinction between the private as domestic and the public as the world beyond the home.

Family and social relations

Although the tasting events were designed to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on the intangible qualities of taste and other bodily sensations, we were struck by how frequently the conversation returned to the subject of family and other social relations, where food's materiality and viscerality were subordinated to its social significance as a carrier of cultural meaning. The family context of cooking and eating is a well-established theme in food research (see, for example, DeVault 1991 and Counihan 2004). Its significance in the current context is that, even when set up to focus on the material and symbolic qualities of food, such as taste and freshness, the conversation kept returning to the sociality of food and the importance of family relations. This was a dominant theme at Ted's dinner, for example, where family dynamics were a central concern.

Ted described his daughter-in-law, Polly, as 'a bit picky' about what she would eat, while Ted's wife Laura forewarned the researcher (Angela) that Polly was quite likely to go into the front-room to watch TV or lay on the couch while others ate. This was 'nothing personal', Laura said - just what they had come to expect. Later, Jonathan criticised Polly's repeated use of her mobile phone during dinner and after the meal. He also talked disparagingly about her culinary skills, saying that 'injecting flavour' is usually his role when Polly is cooking. These were not vicious exchanges with any malicious intent – just casual interactions that shed light on the social dynamics of a typical family meal.

Other (embodied, non-verbal) forms of sociality were apparent in the video recording of the preparations for Ted's meal, where Ted is seen working convivially alongside his grandchildren, Meg and William. In one scene, Meg giggles at Ted's pronunciation of 'hoomus'. Later, while Ted was preparing the fish, William rested his head on Ted's arm in an intimate gesture of love and trust, allowing William to hold the thermometer in a pan of hot oil (see Fig. 4). A similar intimacy was apparent over dinner when Ted picked food from a dish to share with his son Jonathan, leaning in to one another while discussing the food. These apparently mundane moments would be hard to capture from purely interview-based research, underlining the value of an ethnographically-informed, observational approach.

A further example occurred when Ted's family were discussing the meaning of the word 'daube' – the discussion that followed speaking volumes about the family dynamics and endless similar exchanges that

had preceded it. Jonathan offered a culinary explanation, describing it as a classic dish that has been soaked in red wine and herbs for 24 hours. Drawing on his knowledge of Mediterranean cuisine, Ted said he liked the term because 'it's such a Provençal word', debating whether it can be applied to tuna as well as beef since the former isn't marinated overnight. Laura said that the word probably refers to a cooking pot, a suggestion which the men in the room casually ignored. After a long discussion, Polly did an Internet search on her phone which revealed that a *daubière* is a brazing pan. Satisfied to have been proven right, Laura made a thumb's up sign to Angela while the men carried on talking among themselves. These everyday exchanges illuminate the relationship between food and family life in ways that may not have been apparent from other kinds of research.

We do not mean to suggest that our participants' experiences of food and eating are primarily or only orientated towards the expression of family dynamics or that the sensory dimensions of tasting serve only as a metaphor for something else. As Abbots (2017: 2) argues: 'while food is a productive lens through which to explore broader social and political relations, food should also be treated *as food* … worthy of attention as its own object of enquiry, not just as a window into social life'. Rather, we would argue, it is the embodied and sensory nature of food and eating that make it such a powerful means of expressing deeply-held social values. Our tasting events should not, therefore, be thought of as individual engagements with food's sensory properties but as an exploration of the 'social life' of food and eating, to use Appadurai's (1986) evocative phrase.

Several other examples confirm the validity of this observation about the 'social life' of food and eating. During one of the Portuguese events, Nádia's field notes record the 'constant flux' of participants at Joana's dinner:

> While there is a constant flux of conversation, the table is almost never full with all participants. For example, after the soup, one of the guests, Larissa, takes the bowls to the kitchen, Luisa gets up at times to tend to her children and Joana to check the dessert in the oven. All the women were quite involved with the preparation, setting the table, grabbing things from the kitchen etc. The children were mostly playing with each other and would sometimes ask for something else from the table, which they would eat in their mother's lap.

As with the previous examples, there is a lot more going on here than simply cooking and eating. While the food is far from incidental, meal times clearly provide an occasion for a range of other social tasks and interactions: looking after children, providing comfort and care, but also coping with the tensions and anxieties that are part of everyday family life.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the experimental use of a series of 'tasting events' as part of our fieldwork in the UK and Portugal, this paper has shown how taste and tasting can be understood as a shared cultural activity or social practice. Specifically, our research has identified three ways in which taste is made public through the recognition of food's materiality and viscerality, the links between embodiment and emotion, and the contextual significance of the sociality of family life.

Our research has both conceptual and methodological significance. Conceptually, it builds on Counihan and Høyland's (2018) argument about the public nature of taste, revealed during the shared experiences of making, eating and talking about food. It demonstrates how, even in the conventionally 'private' world of domestic consumption, taste and tasting have a public dimension as social practices that are based on shared experience and collective performance. Methodologically, our research has explored the practices of tasting and talking about food, observed in combination, mirroring Schatzki's (2002) comments regarding the 'doings and sayings' that constitute the site of the social. Some of the qualities of food that we have addressed, including 'freshness', are hard to access through interview-based methods alone, necessitating more direct observation in relatively ordinary settings such as meal-times spent with family and friends. We do not underestimate the staged nature of our tasting events or the potential disruptions of everyday life that are involved in being audio or video recorded while preparing and eating food. Even the use of specific ingredients, such as the example of mint (described above), may be seen to have introduced a note of artificiality to the tasting events causing a reaction that may not have occurred without the presence of the researchers. Accepting these limitations (whose precise impact is impossible to judge), we are confident that the method has demonstrated the irreducibly social nature of taste and

tasting rather than seeing them as practices that can only be experienced individually or investigated at a purely personal level.[11]

The fact that participants often struggled to express their tasting experiences in words speaks to the intangible quality of these experiences. It is in the facial expressions, bodily gestures and barely-articulated 'mmms' that taste, in the physical sense, is most clearly expressed. But, more than this, the method adds depth and detail to our understanding of the social life of food through the combination of spoken and embodied practices that can be witnessed at these events.

Accordingly, we do not present 'tasting events' as a stand-alone alternative to other research methods or propose that it is a panacea for the limitations of other forms of data collection. In our research, the tasting events came at the end of a longer process of engaging with our participants and with a range of other actors at various points in the food system. This, we suggest, enabled a deeper understanding of one of the more elusive, but culturally and commercially significant, qualities of food. More generally and with potentially wider significance, our comparative research in the UK and Portugal has demonstrated the multiple ways in which cooking and eating are shared social practices with material, embodied and visceral dimensions.

[11] Hayes-Conroy (2010) reaches a similar conclusion when she argues that we cannot expect to directly grasp each other's visceral realities but that we may be able to access these phenomena through the co-creation of imagined bodily empathies.

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Table 1: The tasting events

Location	Host	Participants	Researcher(s)
UK	Ted, retired professional in his 70s, living in South Yorkshire	Laura (Ted's wife), their son (Jonathan), his partner (Polly) and their daughter (Meg) and son (William)	Angela
UK	Ruby, 29-year-old administrator, trained in environmental health, living in South Yorkshire	Her partner, Ellis (a self-employed electrician) and friends (Anna and Elsa, Max and Joe)	Angela
Portugal	Alberto, in his 60s, owns an organic food business and lives in the Algarve.	Júlia (Alberto's Brazilian wife), a friend (Eduardo) and his Argentinian partner (Maria)	Mónica, Nádia & João
Portugal	Magda, 40-year-old mother of two, living in the Algarve where her husband owns a restaurant.	Jorge (Magda's husband), his parents (Armando and Olga) and brother (José), and their children (aged 6 months and 9 years)	Mónica, Nádia & João
Portugal	Mónica (member of research team) in Lisbon.	British guests Nick (39 years old) and two friends of Mónica's workmates (Mia and Hannah, in their 30s).	Mónica & João
Portugal	Joana, 38-year-old mother of a 2-year-old boy. Artist, works in education and lives in Lisbon.	Joana's friends (Luisa, Sónia and Larissa) and three children	Nádia & João

Fig 1: Mónica's meal in Lisbon (from video)

Fig 2: Testing the firmness of garlic © Angela Meah

Fig 3: Pineapple with mint © Mónica Truninger

Fig. 4: Ted and William at the stove © Angela Meah