

In the last two months, our social lives have almost come to a standstill and many of us have (re)discovered our culinary talents, among other things. Thus, this seemed the ideal moment for us to publish the essay below, which Sue Spaid wrote in response to the exhibition *Amuse-Bouche. The Taste of Art* at the Tinguely Museum in Basel and a

Some might complain that tasting exhibitions are mostly ‘feasts for the eyes’, geared more to the imagination than the tongue.

Given the foodie-craze, it’s hardly surprising that tasting opportunities draw tourists and scholars alike. Taste (salty, sweet, bitter, sour and umami), as compared to flavour, is the faint sensation that remains when one pinches one’s nose while chewing. Since 2018, Bureau d’Alimentation has been serving thematic suppers (past meals have included foraged food and ‘kaa plaa’ at Netwerk Aalst and TV dinners at KVS) to spark public discussions about food. A year later, philosopher of feasts Fabien Vallos dazzled Thalie Lab bon vivants with 20 different cod dishes prepared by him from a single fish. To explore food waste, farming practices, animal treatment, eating habits and dining style, the V&A assembled inventive artworks and design tools. Museum M lets visitors smell scents dispersed from atomizers, such as tea, roasted meat, red wine, candy and strawberries, while touching materials such as a porcelain teacup, ceramic tea bowl, bone and pewter stein; all experiences tied to eating. These samples reference historic objects and painted imagery on view in nearby galleries, reiterating food’s prominence for local artists and gourmands since the 16th Century.

There are numerous reasons why gustation is of museological interest. Dining is a lot like experiencing art, only there has been way more research done to understand how senses join forces to enhance/diminish eating experiences. If you are a ‘foodie’, I highly recommend Charles Spence’s *Gastrophysics: The New Science of Eating*, which will not only awaken you to the collaborative and competitive nature of your five senses, what psychologists call ‘cross-modal perception’; but it will also inspire you to throw better dinner parties. Just as visual art is dominated by sight, ‘eye appeal is half the meal’. But with a little training and a greater focus on one’s other four senses, one’s perceptual acuity can be improved, which is no doubt the main motivation behind such exhibitions. For example, Spence describes a connoisseur who can differentiate 100 beers just by listening to the sound of the bubbles! And as every Belgian knows, beer tastes best drunk from a glass designed to enhance its aroma.

Arty meals
Taste has been part of art ever since the 1910 Futurist Banquet (a reverse-order feast in Trieste) and ‘gastro-astronome’ Guillaume Apollinaire started recording his dinners in the ‘Paris Journal’ (ca. 1912). The Futurists, who first emphasized the importance of combining aroma, taste and sound, famously served meals requiring diners to sniff fumes as dishes passed by. Decades later, Meret Oppenheim served *Frühlingsfest* (1959) atop a woman’s prone body in Bern; Alison Knowles performed the event score *Proposition #2, Make a Salad* (1962) in

London; Daniel Spoerri opened Restaurant Spoerri (1968) in Düsseldorf; Gordon Matta-Clark opened Food (1971-1974) in Soho and German TV broadcast Joseph Beuys cooking in his kitchen (1979) as performance art. Meanwhile, artists have been at the forefront of agricultural reform since the 1970s, opening up permaculture and biodynamic farms or exhibiting as artist-farmers. These artists have gotten eaters to grasp the importance of healthy soil, shared meals and especially social cohesion, since every living being (human and nonhuman) is connected via one massive food web.

Problem is, taste is the most difficult sense to present in an exhibition context. Unlike touch or smell, taste usually requires someone to administer samples. For example, the caterer presents the thematic meals that participants experience during Ecole Mondiale Fieldstations. To entice visitors to ‘Fieldstation Time’ at Poppositions 2019, EM invited beekeeper Jean-François Paquay to mix, bake and serve hand-crafted honey cookies from his portable stove. During “Food”, tasters could sip locally-gleaned Company Drinks (since 2014) and experienced their ‘food futures’ by identifying food values (such as wild, profitable, convenient, biodiverse or affordable) that guides attendants’ creation of customized snacks.

Some might complain that tasting exhibitions are mostly ‘feasts for the eyes’, geared more to the imagination than the tongue. This could prove especially annoying since ‘food porn’ readily stimulates hunger, while recalling meals makes one feel full. As it turns out, both sight and sound direct noses to inform taste. For example, people who don’t ordinarily drink tomato juice order it in flight because roaring engine sounds intensify its umaminess (savouriness), yet suppress sweetness and sometimes saltiness, which explains tasteless airplane food. Sight is so dominant that colours alter flavours, such that experts drinking white wine tinted red note red wine aromas. Aficionados rated red wine served in a black glass under red lighting paired with sweet music ‘fruity’, whereas green lighting paired with sour (dissonant) music brought out its fresher notes. Finally yellow lighting boost appetites, while red or blue lighting curbs it.

Time for Amuse-bouche
Two weeks before COVID-19 closed doors, the Tinguely Museum opened *Amuse-bouche. The Taste of Art*, curated by Annja Müller Alsbach. This exhibition joins this museum’s earlier ‘sense experiments’, *Belle Haleine- The Scent of Art* (2015) and *Prière de toucher. The Touch of Art* (2016), organized to highlight Jean Tinguely’s multi-sensorial approach. Several *Amuse-bouche* artworks afford visitors gustatory experiences. Until the Tinguely reopens,

eaters can home-test three Shimabuku artworks, *Ice Cream with Salt*, *Ice Cream with Pepper* and *Sakepirinha*. And when they return, they can munch off patches of Elizabeth Willing’s pfeffernüsse wall (2011/2020) and colourful candybar paintings (2016/2020) before sipping Slavs and Tatars’ sauerkraut juice, Opavivará’s cachaça-spurting bidet or Emeka Ogboh’s original Sufferhead beer. A Basel stout, this brew is available in the temporarily-installed Roth Bar upstairs. A wonderfully smokey aroma envelopes spectators watching Ogboh’s alluring marketing video in a darkened gallery lined with 100s of empties emitting this scent. With the museum closed, I worry about the fate of Roelof Louw’s pyramid of 8000 oranges (1967/2020), one of which was the most delicious orange I ever ate.

Organized by tastes, this banquet begins with ‘taste of desire’, which features Alexandra Meyer’s butter mound made with breast milk, Janine Antoni’s licked chocolate and lathered soap self-portrait busts and Urs Fischer’s life-like silicon tongue, popping out like a cuckoo as passersby stroll by. An historical survey includes Antwerp painter Jan Davidsz. de Heem’s luscious fruit still life (ca 1600s), Futurist, Surrealist and Eat-Art ephemera, several Spoerri table-top assemblages, Beuys’ curious fried herring bone and Karl Gerstner handmade *Taste Perceptor* (1970), whose pipettes access 13 different taste essences from glass vials. Next up is umami, characterized here by Tom Wesselmann’s spaghetti Bolognese scene, Pol Bury’s 16 brown and white eggs in a pan, Andy Warhol’s amended Campbell’s Soup prints, Fischli/Weiss’ improvised sausage vistas and Torbjørn Rødland’s ‘thousand-dollar’ Kobe beef sandwich.

Sweetness (red), saltiness (white), bitterness (green), tasteless, foreignness and sourness (yellow) round out this visual feast, each with a coloured wall to signal the requisite taste. Although sight is the primary sense here, smell plays a role with Sonja Alhäuser’s machine repeatedly dipping a Virgin Mary statuette in melted white chocolate. As if to alert people to poison’s appeal, Tobias Rehberger displays seven footless bowls with Louboutin-like red bottoms, each sporting a black dollop of strychnine. One of the most astonishing artworks is Sam Taylor-Johnson’s *Still Life* (2001), a 3’44” video that captures dozens of fresh fruits becoming an awesome vanitas of mouldy flesh via time-lapse photography. Another priceless film is Tony Morgan/Daniel Spoerri’s *Resurrection* (1968-1969), which broadcasts the life of a steak in reverse from pooping to frying pan to animal pen. The remnants of Otobang Nkanga’s kola-nut sharing ritual, an immensely moving and thoughtful experience, facilitate foreign taste.

How can visitors taste the art without destroying *Amuse-Bouche* or the artworks themselves? Happily, the Tinguely has scheduled a vast programme of workshops, performances and tours, including five weekly guided tours with taste experiences plus a guided tour for the visually impaired and blind. Once such sessions resume, tasters can also experience the ‘taste of nature’ with Claudia Vogel’s transparent strawberry and moss elixirs that nix sight’s influence and the edible flowers growing in gardener-artist

Marisa Benjamin’s museum-adjacent greenhouse.

Switching gears here, such a foul smell wafts out the Disgusting Food Museum’s front door that it appears propped open to air out the place. One next notices the sign, ‘So Close You Can (Almost) Smell it’. Offensive smells ordinarily protect people from bacteria, yeasts and molds inhabiting rotting food. Unlike other emotions (sadness, happiness, fear, surprise or anger), disgust must be learned, making the DFM part of one’s learning curve. One soon realizes the imagination’s role here, since food that looks or smells terrible/weird/unfamiliar quickly prompts ‘Yuck’. ‘Food adventurers’ must learn how to block their imaginations in order to defeat such sensual alerts.

The DFM does an amazing job of capturing the extreme diversity of people’s tastes, such as Polish Sok z Kapusty Kiszzonej (sauerkraut juice), US twinkies and root beer and Greenlandic Kiviak (a seal stuffed with 500 arctic birds, sewn up and sealed with seal fat, buried and left to rot in the carcass). Its object labels convey the way local delicacies are tied to place and time, since traditional dishes reflect historically-available foodstuff and technologies. Framed as ‘disgusting’, visitors arrive primed to dismiss everything as gross. Much to everyone’s surprise, being exposed to 80 frightening displays has the opposite effect. People’s curiosities are rather piqued, sending them to the ‘tasting bar’ to sample many of the displays. In fact, DFM-founder Sam West genuinely hopes to change people’s minds regarding what counts as edible, since a sustainable planet will require major palette adaptations, such as eating insects instead of meat.

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Spaid authored *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots* (2012).
Amuse-Bouche. The Taste of Art, Tinguely Museum, Basel, CH, through 26 July 2020
Bureau d’Alimentation, nomadic tasting discussions, BE, since 2018
Disgusting Food Museum, Malmö, SE, since 2018
Lagunophorie, Thalie Lab, Brussels, BE, ongoing since 2019
Food: Bigger than the Plate, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, 18 May - 20 October 2019
Ecole Mondiale, Fieldstation Time, The Work of Time, Z33, Hasselt, BE, through 10 May 2020
Alles voor de Vorm, Museum M, Leuven, BE, through 30 May 2021