Matters of taste

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When people say “It’s just a matter of taste”, what they mean is that there is no unique, right answer to the issue under discussion. How foods or drinks taste to people are taken to be a paradigm example of a ‘matter of taste’: De gustibus non est disputandum, as the Ancient Romans once said.

But if that’s the case then why do we actively engage in disputes about taste? It’s perfectly commonplace to have discussions or disagreements over whether some dish, drink or ingredient tastes good or bad, delicious, tasty, disgusting and so on. To see the problem, first imagine two people who are tasting a novel dish and they try to distinguish the ingredients used in making it. There is clearly an answer to the question, and each time they disagree (”It has carrot” - “No, that’s pumpkin”), only one of them can get it right. But now, imagine that one of them says the dish is delicious and the other disagrees. Is only one of them right?

Many people would side with the Ancient Romans and answer “no”: one of them likes the dish, the other doesn’t, and that’s the end of the story. But what if one of the tasters is an expert in cooking? We start to feel that maybe they know better given their experience. Whether something tastes pleasant or unpleasant involves learning: we’ve all gone through the experience of coming to like an item we used to find disgusting. So maybe the taste of food isn’t just a question of personal preferences but of knowledge and experience which is why some people have good taste regarding food. Few people would think that a person who only eats frozen pizzas and a master chef have an equally good taste. Maybe the person who only eats pizza simply isn’t competent enough to make claims about the quality of foods due to her limited experience.

So should we conclude that in the end, we can have reasonable disagreements over taste and the one who has a better taste is the one who gets it right? Empirical evidence suggests that the picture is more complicated than that. For example, people can be divided into non-tasters, tasters, and supertasters regarding how a chemical 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP) tastes to them. As the name indicates, non-tasters don’t taste the chemical whereas to the supertaster it tastes unpleasantly bitter. The natural relative of the chemical is present in a variety of vegetables and other foodstuffs, causing them to taste bitter to the supertaster. The difference is genetic rather than acquired, and the
three groups are thought to be roughly equally large with some differences in distribution between genders and around the globe.

Now, imagine that a non-taster, taster and a supertaster are judging say, a bowl of broccoli soup. If the non-taster thinks it’s delicious, the taster that it’s OK and the supertaster that it’s nasty and bitter, ought we say that only one of them is right? If so, which one? Given that there’s roughly an equal amount of each kind of taster in the world it doesn’t seem that any of them is the abnormal one. Perhaps we should conclude that each of them is right relative to the group of tasters they represent. That seems right since it doesn’t pre-judge one way of tasting over another. But now, let us return to our earlier question about taste and experience. Isn’t it possible to learn to like bitter tastes? Most coffee drinkers find it bitter at first but then grow to like it. So it’s not clear that a supertaster couldn’t grow to like the bitterness she tastes in so many foods.

Currently there simply isn’t an answer to the question of how much experience can affect one’s taste preferences, and what is the extent of our genetic differences. What we do know is the variability among us, which is enough to discourage the idea that if we disagree about taste one of us must be getting it wrong. So, even a picky eater can be right when she judges most foods disgusting. However, since experience matters, the picky eater can train herself to like more things even if it’s not fun at first. Liking more things makes it much easier to get pleasure from food so the effort is worth it.

That brings us to my final point. Since our tastes are adaptable, why not intentionally adapt them towards the healthy, easy to cook and ecological? If there is any point to the idea of a good or bad taste, it should rather be found in a taste that’s good for the eater as well as her environment. We are not determined by nature to remain what we are at birth, be it regarding our abilities, taste, knowledge or preferences. What we eat is one of the important choices we make, and thanks to our adaptability we can learn to like food that keeps us healthy and saves other creatures as well as our environment. In the end, liking may be a matter of taste, but we are free to influence which kind of taste we come to have.