

June 2016 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Sonically Seasoning Your Food and Drink

Ever thought how music might affect your taste buds? Not only does the color of the plates on which food is served affect what you perceive as salty or sweet, but specific sounds and tempi of music can enhance or diminish flavors of food.

In a nut shell:

- Wine and other drinks may taste more expensive when listening to classical music!
- Flavors of food may last longer in the mouth when slow music is playing!
- Increase the tempo of music and food flavors fade more quickly!
- Piano music enhances the sweetness of foods being eaten!
- Match nationality of music with selection of food and enhance the flavors!
- Like a bass beat (think tubas)? The bitter taste of chocolate is enhanced.
- High levels of sound (think flutes) make food taste sweeter!
- Believe it or not, research studies show the more you like the music being played, the more you enjoy the food. The opposite is true as well.

Try some “sonic seasoning” when eating chocolate by listening to a low-pitched sound and see if your taste awareness shrinks to the back of your tongue and “focuses on the chocolate’s bitter elements.” Switch to a high frequency and do you have feelings of sweetness in the mouth? In a laboratory setting, volunteers were fed cinder toffee (also called puff candy or sea foam) while high and low frequency sounds were played. Subjects were asked to rate the taste on a scale from sweet to bitter. Interestingly, low notes brought out the bitter and high notes enhanced sweetness. To see what happened in the real world, Oxford University researchers spent one month in which “the London restaurant House of Wolf served a “sonic cake pop” of chocolate-coated bittersweet toffee, which came with a telephone number. On the other end of the line was an operator instructing the diner to dial one for sweet and two for bitter, and they were played the high and low-pitched sounds accordingly.” The same results occurred! Low notes = bitter and high notes = sweetness.

Research scientists, at Oxford University (with lead researcher C. Spence), have been looking at synesthetic tendencies related to the taste of food and studying the idea of modulating taste of foods with sensory sounds. Using a tag line of “multi-sensory food perception,” they suggest that sound is the “final frontier” in food presentation in that flavor perception can be modulated by sound. Charles Spence, interviewed on NPR alluded to textures of food, which have unique sounds all their own: the crunch of chips, the slurp of coffee or the fizz of soda for example. “But the other place where sound affects taste,” he told NPR, “is in the environment: imagine listening to the sounds of the sea while you’re eating fish at a seaside restaurant.” “You can then start creating experiences where you play particular kinds of music or soundscapes to diners or to drinkers while they’re tasting....We’re able to show that we can change the experience in [the] mouth by about 5 or 10 percent.”

Consider Ben & Jerry’s ice cream company use of an iTunes app link with their “Scoop of Happiness” to augment their reality-enhanced feature called Moo Vision. “Holding up a pint of New York Super Fudge Chunk, Cherry Garcia, Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough or Milk & Cookies ice cream to your iPhone will cause vector images of cocoa farmers.” With classical music, select a dark chocolate or coffee-tasting dessert, play something like “Nessun Dorma” from Turandot which has several low-pitched sounds. These sound should bring out bitter tastes of dark chocolate or coffee. Off course, near the end of the aria are high-pitched sounds.

Taste the Rainbow! We do know that our ability to taste natural flavors of food decreases as we age. Maybe that is why more salt and sugar are added to older adults’ diets! To counter this, explore multi-sensory experiences that involve taste, smell, sound, touch and the environment in your future dining and drinking.

Added note: Why airline food can't win! Loud background noise has been found to suppress saltiness, sweetness and overall enjoyment of food. Add high altitude to the mix which can block nasal passages and one’s sense of smell (aroma of food) is affected.

Further discussion at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3118267/Forget-salt-pepper-enhance-food-dash-MUSIC-Sonically-seasoning-using-tunes-match-cuisine-boosts-flavour>

<http://www.psfk.com/2015/06/music-and-food-sonic-seasoning-university-of-oxford.html>

<http://mashable.com/2010/07/09/ben-and-jerrys-iphone-app/#Fe4IvXM1uaqw>

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2014/mar/11/sound-affects-taste-food-sweet-bitter>

<http://condimentjunkie.co.uk/blog/2015/4/27/bittersweet-symphony>

<http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/12/20/372142738/want-to-enhance-the-flavor-of-your-food-put-on-the-right-music>