

Utak, Tiyan at Kaugalian: Building a Gastronomy of Good Taste

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A personal gastronomic introduction

- Growing up male. . .out of the kitchen.
- Growing up payat.
- Today, sandwich generation with nutritional challenges:
 - Parents
 - Children
 - Personal as senior citizen, still payat but taba.

Problems and Solutions (?)

- Nutritional deficiency
- Overweight
- Food insecurity
- Eat more; supplements
- Diet
- Produce more or import more

Going back to fundamentals: why do we eat

- We eat to live (utilitarian) vs We live to eat (hedonistic).
- Even if we tell our children to eat what is on their plate, we know much of eating depends on taste (lasa), which we presume is one of the five (or six senses) – visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory. The basic tastes, in turn, are: sweetness, saltiness, sourness, bitterness and savoriness or umami.
- The gustatory is seen as being processed mainly by the tongue, with some connections to the brain.

Nutrition reduced to: (Tiyan lang ba?)



Expanding our understanding of taste as gustatory and olfactory

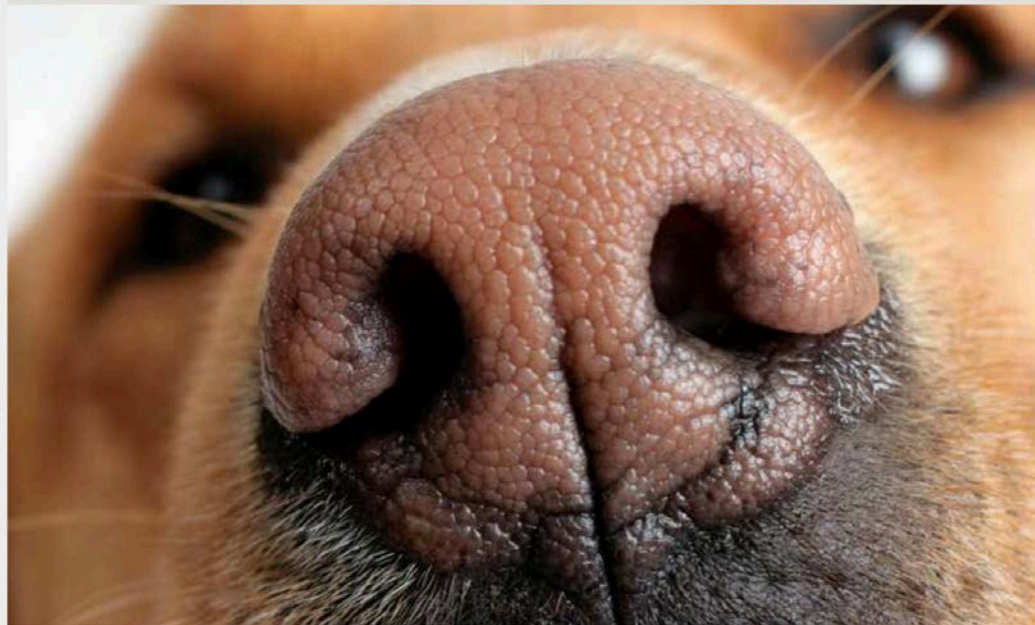
Science



The nose has it: it's no surprise humans' sense of smell can be as good as dogs

🕒 40m

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Two olfactory senses:

- Orthonasal (ortho, forward) like our pet dogs. Amoy ng amoy, nose close to the ground. Said to be thousands of times more sensitive than humans. Used not just for food but for “sensing” the world, humans, friend and foe. Humans still use this orthosensing, but in a much reduced way. Culturally, there will also be variations. Filipinos still “sniff” much more than many other cultures. We sniff everything from food (which is a good survival strategy) to people (ang bango bango niya).

. . .or is it three?

- Retronasal sense, which integrates olfactory and gustatory **and** the tactile. We chew our food, using the tactile, “feeling” its texture (smooth, creamy, crispy, etc.), temperature (warm releases more volatile compounds, cold can cause brain freeze).
- Chewing and swallowing (breathing out) releases molecules into the nasal, where numerous olfactory sensory receptors take over and send signals to the brain.

Pinch test

But wait. . .not just two, or three senses but. .

.

- Visual: colors enhance the intensity of smells.
- Auditory: snap, crackle of chicharon!
- Umami: fullness of flavor

Our “taste” and flavor apparatus:

“Images”

- Smells are images, similar to the visual. We “recognize” faces and places as a gestalt, a whole, together with all kinds of associations, positive and negative, developed through time. We smell lechon and are sensuously bombarded, bringing in multisensorial memories as well.

Nature, nurture and evolution

- Nature: Sensory receptors form a large percentage of our genome.
- Nurture: Culture and society shape our taste (now more than lasa), from the womb to old age.
- Both nature and nurture evolved in terms of our evaluation of food and flavors, enhancing survival (eg being able to smell and taste spoiled food)

Graph

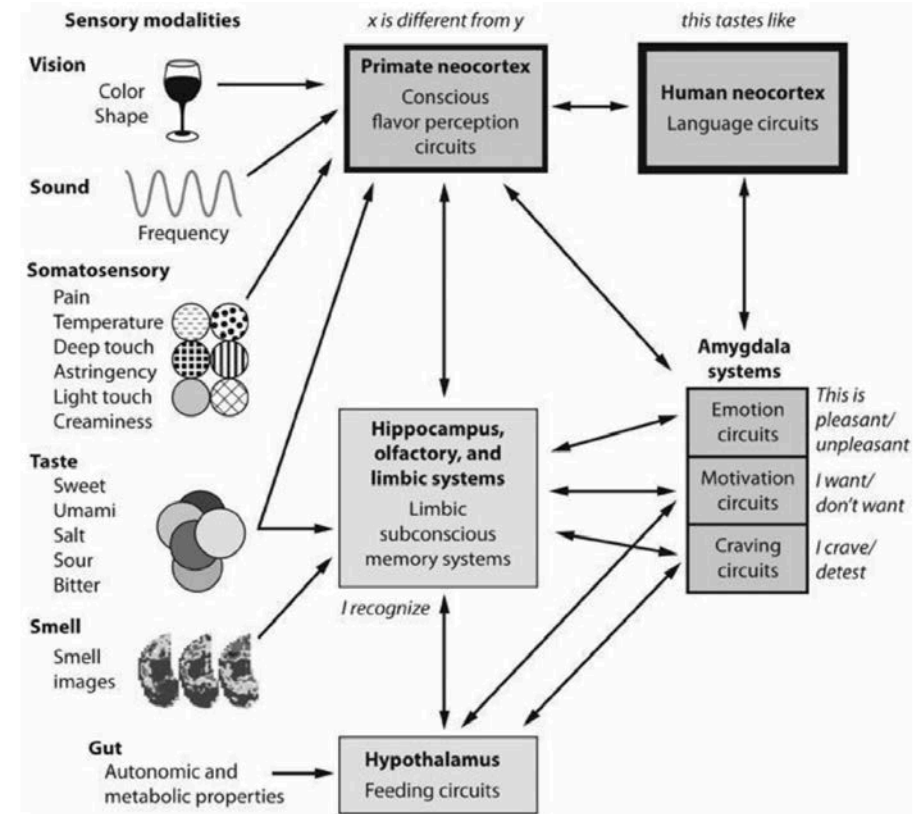
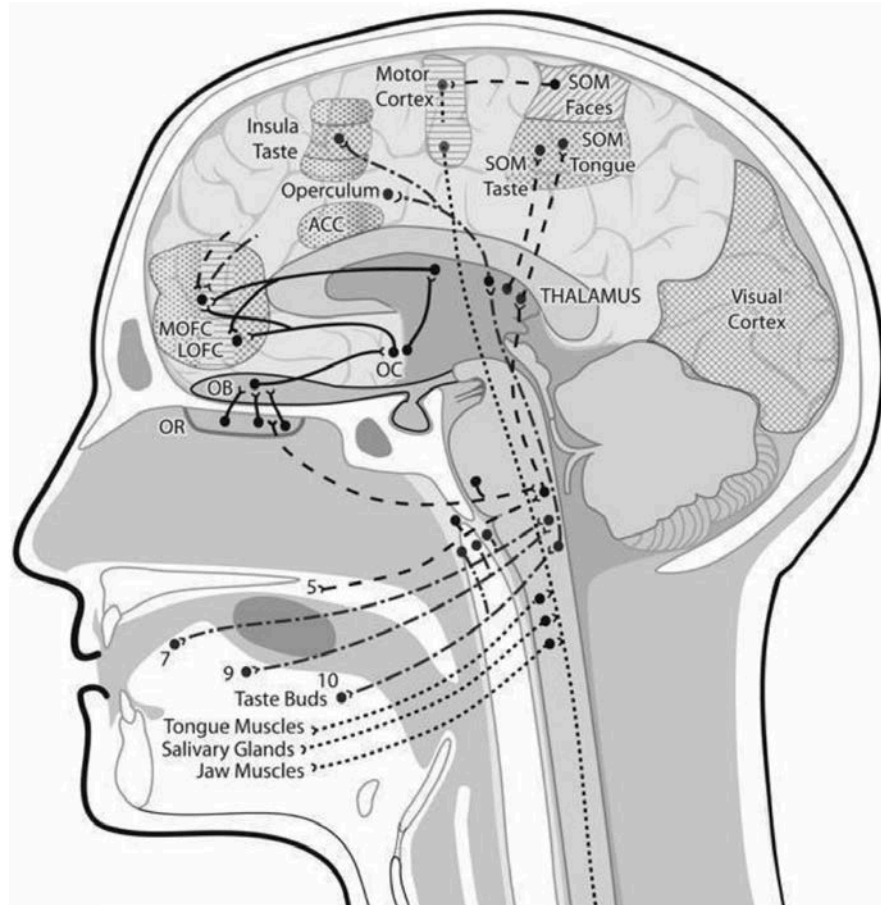


FIGURE 18.2 The human brain flavor system shown as a flow diagram

All converge to make us decide:

- Sarap!
- Lami!
- Delicious!
- Ho chia! (Hokkien Chinese)
- Lekker! (Dutch)



Sarap!

- Sarap and other Filipino terms go beyond taste and flavor but the sensuous (use of the senses) as well as the sensual (sexual). It is pleasurable, involving dopamine to the extent that we can become addicted to the “kasarapan” much like people are addicted to drugs. (Think of comfort foods).
- In Filipino we call sex (actually its kasarapan) luto ng Diyos.

Nasa tao ang gawa. . .

- Humans transcend the senses because our olfactory bulb is in the frontal lobe, working with our ability to reason, to think in the abstract, to plan ahead.
- Humans found ways to cultivate food. Humans discovered fire (red flower in the Jungle Book, which the villain lion coveted). Fire led to cooking, which intensified tastes and flavors. We also discovered fermentation, which made foods more intense. Agriculture and the fermenting of foods, maybe even more so beverages for alcohol, may have contributed to our settling down rather than being nomadic.

Sociality

- Humans added the social dimension to eating, transforming a meal into an occasion for friendship and camaraderie, kinship bonding, planning and negotiating (as in merienda). Remember this is not just solid food but beverages as well, alcoholic beverages ultimately social: iba ang may pinagsamahan.
- Sadly, meals also became occasions for status display, competition, even domination and conquest.

Manipulation and conquest

- Colonialism and food preferences. Just look at our dependency on wheat for our bread and noodles. “Colonial” memories and inter-generational imprinting in our desire for imported foods, well represented by



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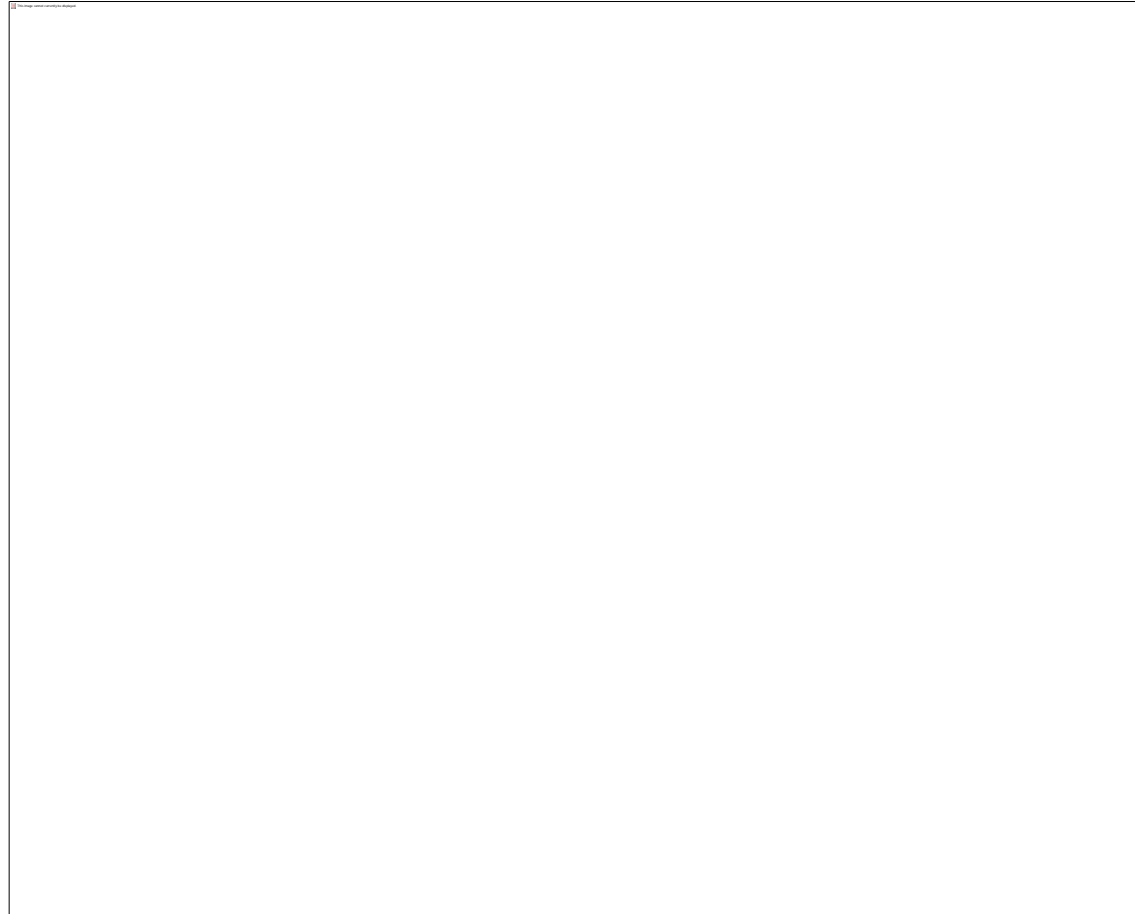
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And more. . .



Delotavo, Itak sa Puso ni Juan



Kaugalian

- Culture is habituation and food culture is a neurogastronomy interacting with society. We are habituated, predisposed to eat certain foods because of imprinting.

Marketing and advertising draws on “science”

- Psychology and imprinting, which we know now starts even in the womb. Children’s tastes are to a large extent primed within the first year of life (some research say six months), especially for sugar.
- Fast foods and junk foods play on all our senses, even overloading them: bulk, sugar, vetsin. With auditory and visual stimuli.
- Messages draw on the smell images. So many slogans, eg iba ang may pinagsamahan.

Implications: addressing malnutrition

- Being conscious of the role of imprinting: what are pregnant mothers taking? What are we feeding our infants and children?
- Addressing the multisensorial nature of taste: How might we enhance food, the olfactory-gustatory, visual, auditory, tactile, umami (without vetsin please). Especially for the elderly how might we enhance sociality to get them not just to eat, but to thrive?

Addressing malnutrition

- Returning to folk wisdom in culinary lifeways. Lechon and other prestige foods (usually fried) used to be served only occasionally, as part of large celebrations. Today, their “prestige” has been devalued and trivialized.
- Recognizing folkways may also be problematic eg withholding fats from pregnant mothers.

Implications: addressing food insecurity

- Woe to societies and families beholden to microwave, processed foods and fast foods.
- How much of culture and society is tapped to enhance food security: knowing and using our local food resources, including cooking methods.

Implications: addressing food insecurity

- How discerning are we with food farming, particularly:
 - introduced germplasm for food production and potential displacement of the local? (Golden snails, cream dory) This includes the massive changing of our appreciation of good food. Irony of malnourished fisherfolk eating instant noodles with canned sardines.
 - Farming methods that upset ecological balance, eg fish cages upsetting hydrodynamics and biodiversity, leading to harmful algal blooms (red tide).

Implications: addressing food insecurity

- How conscious are we about passing on gastronomic knowledge and skills to daughters AND sons? This includes what foods we have, how they look, how they are produced, where we can get them, how we can prepare them for a meal, how we can assess them (think of fish freshness), including the whole range of organoleptic criteria (lasang gilik, lasang liya; ripe and unripe fruits)

Start with ourselves and our family



Source of our food



Grace and sarap

- Grace before and after meals is a way of imprinting too, priming us to appreciate the food and all who participated to bring us a meal, and of eating together. At the end of the meal, we signal our brains, asking it to take a snapshot not for Facebook but for our mental databank so all that we ate, all the “sarap”, will keep returning. This is habituating ourselves to good taste, good food.

- Food allows us to appreciate the wealth of simplicity, of simple but savory meals, taken with friends and family, ever conscious that we live and eat simply so others may live.

References

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- Nawa'y lahat kayo sana,
laging busog sa grasya!