

Nicola Perullo. *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food.* Columbia University Press 2016. 176 pp. \$30.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231173483).

Nicola Perullo's *Taste as Experience*, originally written in Italian, draws on both the author's philosophical background and his hands-on experience as a professor of aesthetics at a culinary institute. His aim is to understand taste 'from the inside,' that is, with a focus on the experience of taste. He makes use of philosophers from a number of traditions, though his greatest influence—evident in his very title—is Dewey. Whether or not a reader usually admires Dewey's philosophy itself, Perullo's use of his perspective on 'experience' will be enlightening.

For purposes of analysis, Perullo divides taste into what he terms three 'modes of access,' stressing that these modes are not discrete but overlap and blend. Although they typically mingle in experience, treating them in three separate sections is illuminating. Among other things, it reveals the limitations of two rival approaches: one that would narrow studies of taste to immediate sensory and hedonic responses, and the other that presumes taste to be entirely inflected by cultural expectations. As Perullo demonstrates, both features of the sense need to be acknowledged in order to understand the complexities of the experiences delivered through taste.

The first mode of access is Pleasure. This zone of taste is initially experienced in infancy with the taste of mother's milk. Far from merely infantile, however, tastes that simply strike one as delicious (luckily) persist throughout a lifetime. Perullo dubs this aspect of taste 'naked,' as it is free from the framing of custom and culture. 'There is a pleasure that we could define as *naked*, childlike, that is not lived as socially constituted, and that refers to very deep levels of our psychophysical being' (29).

Entering taste by way of this first mode of access does not engage expertise. It is a kind of dumbstruck delight, and as such, it is a realm of taste that most succumbs to the old *de gustibus* assumption—the dismissive claim that taste is merely subjective and insufficiently shared to dispute about. Of course, without the possibility of disputation there is little entry for philosophy, and therefore many theorists writing on food have ignored this first mode and emphasized how full taste experiences are penetrated by culture in the development of cuisines, about which there is plenty of discussion and dispute. It is an advantage of Perullo's approach that he can acknowledge expertise and culture without leaving the purely hedonic element of taste behind.

The second mode of access, Knowledge, addresses culture, history, and learning, which 'dress' the nakedness of taste. This zone includes the array of factors that influence dietary customs, expectations, and appreciations. Despite the power of culture to frame culinary practices, however, those early enjoyments are neither expunged nor ever fully dressed. 'Dressed taste sketches a different way to experience taste, apparently more reasonable and balanced. Culture accompanies and empowers pleasure, returning it to shareability and public language. However, these two approaches are not alternatives. They represent different experiences, different accentuation preferences, which in many cases are even intertwined' (70). It is dressed taste that includes the importance of learning and practice in order to cultivate and refine experience, making the preparations of food and drink squarely matters of discussion and dispute.

Tasting experiences are individual, even singular events that, in Perullo's mind, invite narratives to comprehend fully. That is to say, generalizations about the complex aesthetic relationships that food and drink provide require supplement with specific accounts of eating and drinking in order to understand the variety that taste experience delivers. To emphasize this point, his study is amplified with generous helpings of literature and artful descriptions of the different modes of tasting. Calvino and Proust are but two of the authors whose writings illustrate Perullo's

position, and it is a great boon to the reader to have these specific narratives on hand to grasp the more general points of this book.

The third mode of access to taste is initially surprising: Indifference. But after the first raised eyebrow, one realizes how important it is to acknowledge that eating and drinking are simply not activities to which one can always pay attention. What Perullo calls ‘gustatory indifference’ is more common than not, for it describes the experience of eating without any particular attention to what is consumed. ‘Normally we eat and drink using perceptive capacities variable in intensity and attention according to the circumstances. In some cases, the level of attention is so low that it does not elicit an explicit gustatory intentionality, a ‘focus’ on taste as such’ (96).

This is no surprise, for we eat so often and so routinely that it is inevitable that we don’t always pay attention. Neither transported by pleasure nor occupied with attentive connoisseurship, most of the time we eat while reading or conversing, chew and swallow while daydreaming, or just fuel up. This quotidian fact, however, does not count against the aesthetics of taste, nor does the access of indifference disqualify those experiences from aesthetic relevance. Dewey’s perspective is useful to explain why. When we access taste by the mode of indifference, our eating does not progress from beginning to end in the way that Dewey would count as *an* experience—the kind that is singled out as an aesthetic encounter. Yet it still is part of the ‘ecological’ relationships that we each possess with food and drink, which surround more robust aesthetic encounters.

The book concludes with a section called ‘The Wisdom of Taste, The Taste of Wisdom,’ which draws together elements of the earlier argument into a picture of the aesthetic insights that taste can attain. Wisdom is not expertise or connoisseurship, but rather ‘the ability to recognize and understand the emergence, the relevance, or the presence of each of the three described modes of access from a refined, comprehensive, and aware perception’ (115). The wisdom of taste deepens our understanding of the various aesthetic relationships that develop in our personal and cultural interactions with the world around.

Perullo has a sophisticated approach to the complexities of what can be meant by ‘objective’ and ‘subjective,’ and his analysis of taste offers a model for dealing with some recurrent and perennial disputes. As indicated above, one of the problems that plagues aesthetics is the idea that appreciation of an aesthetic sort is purely individual and refers to nothing outside of the moment of enjoyment. This attitude is even more acute when investigation turns to food and drink, rendering enjoyment literally a mere ‘matter of taste.’ That approach more or less precludes interesting philosophical discussion, but such a dismissal rests on ignoring the difference between ‘I like this’ and ‘this is good.’ The former statement may be unchallengeable, but the former truly is not, as wine experts and culinary reviewers attest as much as do experts in art when it comes to debating their subjects. Perullo’s distinction between individual pleasures and considered judgments of quality is carefully drawn and should go some distance towards mitigating any dismissive attitude toward food and drink as ‘merely subjective.’

A great advantage of Perullo’s study is that he presents a thorough picture of what it means to call the sense of taste ‘aesthetic’ without having to address the question of whether cuisines ought to be counted as works of art. He does have a few things to say on this question, but because of his wide sense of what is important about taste, art is not a subject that demands much consideration. Perullo notes how the traditional elevation of sight and hearing over the bodily senses of taste, smell, and touch has skewed thinking about food and sidelined it from standard philosophical thinking. However, he sensibly refuses any simple reversal of that hierarchy, which informs bodily experience itself. Nor does he elevate taste and the other bodily senses to the contemplative status of vision and hearing. Since he aims to bring to light the complexity of our relationships with food and drink, he

concentrates on that subject to illuminate the truly embodied nature of experience when taste commands attention with its own qualities and values both hedonic and meaningful. Certain kinds of food and drink may enter the artworld, but they do not occupy the center of the aesthetic relationships we have with taste, which are sometimes memorably special and other times forgettable everyday phenomena. The result is a picture of the variable values of taste that pervade everyday life.

This book is short but packed with provocative ideas. The casual reader who dips into the text will not find much help from the index, which is scanty and does not offer a good guide to where various subjects are discussed and references employed. It is recommended, therefore, that one start at the beginning and read through to the end, a worthwhile journey because of Perullo's enjoyable development of a perspective that is distinctive, well-informed, and thoughtful.

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