



**COURSE INTRODUCTION:  
GETTING GROUNDED**

L.3

# THE POWER OF TASTE

## Note to Teachers

In this lesson, students will use the nineteenth-century work of Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin to consider the role of taste. Brillat-Savarin (1755 – 1826) was a French lawyer and politician. He is best known, however, for his food writing, and often credited with creating the genre. In 1825, he published *The Physiology of Taste*, which was translated in English in 1949 by celebrated food writer M.F.K. Fisher. His well-known quotation “tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are” is included in this collection of meditations and essays.

### Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- explore the sense of taste and its relationships to other senses.
- expose students to one of the earliest food writers and to the genre of food writing.
- consider the physiological and sociological conceptions of taste.

### Objectives

- Students will use a series of questions to read and analyze short excerpts from Brillat-Savarin’s Meditation “On Taste.”
- Students will use the original and modernized versions of the text to help them navigate a text written in a very different era.



# THE POWER OF TASTE

Please use this margin to notate how to best adapt this curriculum to your students.

## Materials

- Copies of “Meditation 2: On Taste” (full version or excerpts below, depending on lesson option).

## Instructions

### OPTION 1

1. Assign reading to the students before the class and hand out discussion questions to help them prepare for the classroom conversation.

### OPTION 2

1. Divide students into four or five groups. (The short first excerpt could be used to model what follows)
2. Give the students five minutes to read the selection carefully and begin to answer the question that precedes it on their own.
3. Give students five minutes to work together, to share their ideas and to prepare a collective response to their question.
4. Ask students to summarize the critical ideas in the excerpt for their classmates, and to support their claims with the specific language of the text.

## Application

5. Focused Free Write #1 (5 minutes): Remind students that the book from which these excerpts come has never gone out of print. How might they explain the book’s importance and popularity across nearly two centuries on the basis of what they have read?

Ask a sampling of students to read their FFWs out loud.

Answers might include:

- Brillat-Savarin tries to explain how humans taste.
- Brillat-Savarin believes that the pleasure we get from food is useful (and—as a Christian—that God explicitly created the pleasure of taste) to ensure our survival as a species.
- Brillat-Savarin believes that we can cultivate taste—that is, get better and better at it—over time.

Depending on the students’ responses, follow up with some or all of these questions:

1. Why is pleasure important, according to Brillat-Savarin?
2. What kind of eater do you think that Brillat-Savarin would like us to become? That is, if he were to write advice for how to eat, what would it look like? How does the text support your ideas?

In other parts of this work, Brillat-Savarin talks about the idea of the gourmand. In today’s French, this term is often used to describe a glutton, someone who loves food and happily eats anything and everything. In Brillat-Savarin’s day, the word was closer to “gourmet,” the idea of an eater who is discerning and thoughtful, and whose enjoyment of food comes in part from the thoughtful selection, cooking, and relishing of it.



## THE POWER OF TASTE

3. In English, the “taste” is a verb—that is, “to taste a food.” It is also a noun that refers either to a small sample of a food (“take a taste of something”) or to flavor or a combination of flavors (“enjoy the taste of a food”).

But we also use the word “taste” as a term that expresses social or aesthetic qualities—that is, “to have good taste.”

Do you hear anything of this last definition of “taste” in the excerpts you read?

[Responses to this question should follow directly from your discussion of the prior question—the idea of a gourmet. Brillat-Savarin admits that we all must eat, but suggests that the more thoughtfully we taste our food, the more taste we have. Unlike some other senses like sight, which can be enhanced by a microscope or binoculars, we do not have tools to enhance taste. But we do have the capacity to develop our tastes and our ability to taste—to cultivate our senses—in ways that will increase our enjoyment and the quality of our lives. This thoughtfulness lies at the root of Brillat-Savarin’s notion of “having good taste.”]

6. Close the lesson by asking for questions and by reviewing key ideas from the texts.

### Lab

Lesson 3’s cooking lab builds on the prior lab and the lesson on taste, using a very simple dish: Farm Tzatziki. This lab has a double focus:

**Review of your introduction to knife skills.** Tzatziki is a simple dip that offers opportunities to focus closely again on knife skills. Its ingredients require quite a bit of chopping, so it is a good time to reinforce knife skills and to introduce or review knife cuts.

**Beginning your list of taste words.** Farm Tzatziki is also an ideal dish to begin a conversation about taste vocabulary. Before you begin cooking, you may ask students to think back to their last meal and to write down words they might use to describe its taste or texture. Ask students to avoid words of judgment and focus on descriptive words. In this lab, you set a precedent that you will want to follow all semester: having students reflect on taste thoughtfully rather than react negatively to new taste experiences.

Begin a master list of taste words, by asking students to share their descriptive words—writing them down as they hear new words—and by listing them on the board or poster paper.

As students share that list, you may want to highlight any words that are judgmental (whether positive or negative) and ask that they always be replaced with descriptors. You may also want to note words that ally with taste (such as smell or texture) and those that may affect taste (appearance). Build the fullest and most well organized list that you can. Do not worry, however, that that list is not terribly long: the list will be a good barometer of your students’ food experiences and you can add to it well into the semester!

Farm Tzatziki offers, between the dip and the carrots you will eat with it, good contrasts of textures and flavors. You may want to encourage students to taste the ingredients separately and then in the completed dish.

As students are tasting the tzatziki and carrots, ask them to write down smell, taste, and texture words that come to mind. Reaffirm the desirability of descriptors and add to your master lists!



## THE POWER OF TASTE

### FARM TZATZIKI

16 students

Students can either share a knife, peeler and cutting board or get their own. Below is the list if students get their own equipment.

#### Equipment List

- 16 knives
- 16 cutting boards
- 16 peelers
- 2 medium bowls
- 1 small bowl
- Mixing/serving spoon
- ½ teaspoon
- Hand juicer

#### Food Items

- Small bunch fresh cilantro
- Small bunch fresh parsley
- 1 medium to large cucumber
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 lemon
- Salt
- 3 cups Greek yogurt
- Pepper
- 16 medium carrots and or/other seasonal vegetables



# THE POWER OF TASTE

## FARM TZATZIKI

YIELD: 3 cups

### Ingredients

- 4 sprigs cilantro
- 4 sprigs parsley
- 1 medium to large cucumber
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Juice from half a lemon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 cups Greek yogurt
- Pepper to taste
- 16 carrots and/or other seasonal vegetables, one per person to dip, or another seasonal vegetable to dip

### Directions

1. Remove any hard stems from the cilantro and parsley and chop remaining parts.
2. Chop ends off the cucumber and peel. Cut lengthwise and scrape out seeds. Discard seeds. Finely chop remaining cucumber.
3. Add the cilantro, parsley, garlic, cucumber, olive oil, lemon juice and salt to the Greek yogurt, stirring well together. Set aside.
4. Peel carrots and get into sticks.
5. Serve right away or chill for about 2 hours before serving to let the flavors blend.



# THE POWER OF TASTE

JEAN-ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN from THE PHYSIOLOGY OF TASTE



Use the space below to note key ideas, themes, or surprising takeaways from the reading.

Handwriting lines for notes

“ The creator while forcing men to eat in order to live, tempts him to do so with appetite and then rewards him with pleasure. ”

The following selections come *The Physiology of Taste* written by Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (BREE-yah Sava-RANH), who lived from 1755-1826. While Brillat-Savarin uses the term “physiology” in his title—the branch of biology that studies the parts and functions of living organisms—he did not have scientific training. He was, in fact, a lawyer who became a politician during the French Revolution. Despite his lack of scientific training, through this text Brillat-Savarin put forth one of the first accounts we have of how we taste and why taste is important. Brillat-Savarin’s witty rumination on food and life has never gone out of print in the nearly 200 years since it was first published, which is a good indicator of its importance and popularity. Scholars describe *The Physiology of Taste* as the foundational text of food writing.

In the *Physiology of Taste*, Brillat-Savarin argues that human senses of taste, touch, hearing, smell, and sight improved with human evolution. He imagines the first humans as having poor sight and hearing, for example. Human senses improved over time, he writes, in three ways:

1. As the human brain developed, it registered impressions of sensory information and reflected on a sensory experience.
2. The senses, such as smell and taste, worked together, providing humans with greater sensory ability.
3. Humans developed tools that aided their senses, such as eyeglasses and the microscope to enhance sight.

The selections come from “On Taste.”<sup>1</sup> They appear in two forms: Brillat-Savarin’s own words (*in italics*), and a modernized adaptation. Please read both; use the adaptation to help you understand the original.

## I. Why do we have a sense of taste?

Taste seems to possess two main functions.

1. *It invites us, by arousing our pleasure, to repair the constant losses, which we suffer through our physical existence.*
2. *It helps us to choose from the variety of substances which Nature presents to us, those which are best adapted to nourish us.*

*In this choice, taste is greatly helped by the sense of smell, as we shall see later; it can be established by a general maxim that nourishing things are not repulsive to either sense.*

1) MFK Fisher, trans., *The Physiology of Taste* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1972. 35-40, 42-43.



# THE POWER OF TASTE

## Taste works in two ways

- (1) By giving us pleasure when we eat, taste prompts us to restore the energy we have used in the activities of our daily lives.
- (2) It helps us choose the most nutritious goods from all of the edible foods available in Nature.

As we shall see later, the sense of smell helps taste; so we can establish the general rule that nourishing goods both smell and taste good.

## II. What are the human organs of taste?

*It is not easy to determine precisely what parts make up the organ of taste. It is more complicated than it seems.*

*Certainly, the tongue plays an important role in the mechanics of tasting; endowed as it is with a fairly powerful muscular force, it helps to moisten, mash, churn about, and swallow the food.*

*Moreover, by means of the varying numbers of papillae, which protrude like tiny buds from its surface, it saturates itself with the tasteful and soluble particles of whatever body it is in contact with . . .*

*The inside cheeks furnish saliva, which is equally necessary to the act of chewing and to making the food of such a consistency as can be swallowed; . . . while without the final savoring which takes place at the back of the tongue, the whole sensation of taste would be obscure and quite incomplete.*

*I have already stated that the sense of taste resides mainly in the papillae of the tongue. Now the study of anatomy teaches us that all tongues are not equally endowed with these taste buds, so that some may possess even three times as many of them as others. This circumstance explains why, of two diners seated at the same feast, one is delightfully affected by it, while the other seems almost to force himself to eat; the latter has a tongue but thinly provided with papillae, which proves that the empire of taste may already have its blind and deaf subjects.*

It is hard to know exactly what parts of the mouth enable us to taste, but the question of how we taste is more complicated than it might first seem.

The tongue definitely plays an important role. It is a powerful muscle that helps to moisten, mash, turn, and swallow our food.

Moreover, the taste buds, which project from the surface of the tongue like tiny buds, bring the tongue into contact with flavorful food particles. [Brillat-Savarin notes elsewhere that we taste the food particles that have dissolved in our saliva. He calls them “soluble bodies.”]

The inside cheeks produce the saliva that moistens our food and enables us to swallow it; . . . while the final act of taste occurs at the back of the tongue—without which our sensation of taste would be inconclusive and very incomplete.



# THE POWER OF TASTE

Taste buds are key to our ability to taste, but not all tongues have the same number. Some tongues may have three times as many taste buds as others. This situation explains why one diner at a feast may be delighted while another must force himself to swallow his food. The latter eater has few taste buds—the taste equivalent of being blind or deaf.

## III. How complex is our capacity to taste?

*The number of tastes is infinite, since every soluble body has a special flavor, which does not wholly resemble any other.*

*Tastes are modified, moreover, by their combinations with one, two, or a dozen others, so that it is impossible to draw up a correct chart, listing them from the most attractive to the most repellent, from the strawberry to the griping bitter apple. Anyone who has ever attempted this of course has failed.*

*This is not astonishing, for given the fact that there exists an indefinite series of simple tastes which can change according to the number and variety of their combinations, we should need a whole new language to describe all these effects and mountains of folio foolscap<sup>2</sup> to define them, and unknown numerical characters for their classification.*

*Up to the present time there is not a single circumstance in which a given taste has been analyzed with stern exactitude so that we have been forced to depend on a small number of generalizations such as sweet, sugary, sour, bitter, and other like ones which express, in the end, no more than the words agreeable and disagreeable, and are enough to make themselves understood and to indicate, more or less, the taste properties of the sapid body which they describe.*

The number of tastes is infinite, since all soluble particles have a distinct flavor.

Moreover, tastes change when they are combined with one, two, or a dozen others. It is impossible to chart all tastes, from the best to the worst, from the perfect strawberry to the apple so bitter that it leaves an unpleasant dry feeling on your tongue. Anyone who has tried has failed.

This situation is not surprising. Given that the still-undefined number of simple flavors changes with the number and variety of their combinations, we would need a new language to describe them, mountains of paper to define them, and a new system of notation to classify them.

Because we do not yet have a means to describe tastes exactly, we are forced to depend on a few general categories, such as “sweet, sugary, sour, bitter,” and terms that mean little more than “agreeable and disagreeable.” These terms are enough to make ourselves understood and convey, more or less, the taste properties of our food.

<sup>2</sup>) Folio foolscap is paper cut to 8 ½ x 13 ½ inches.





# THE POWER OF TASTE

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## IV: What is the relationship of smell to taste?

A man eats nothing without smelling it more or less consciously, while with unknown foods his nose acts always as the first sentinel, crying out “who goes there?”

When the sense of smell is cut off, taste itself is paralyzed, as can be proved by three experiments, which anyone may perform with equal success.

First experiment: When the nasal membrane is irritated by a violent coryza, taste is completely wiped out: there is absolutely no flavor in anything one swallows in spite of the fact that the tongue continues to be in its normal state.

Second experiment: If one eats while pinching shut his nostrils, he is astonished to find his sense of taste imperfect and faint; by this means, the nastiest dosage can be swallowed quite easily . . .

These various effects all stem from the same cause, the lack of cooperation of the sense of smell, with the result that a sapid body is appreciated only for its own juice and not for the fumes which emanate from it.

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A man smells his food more or less consciously. His nose is the first organ to detect an unfamiliar food, like a soldier who cries, “Who goes there?”

An inability to smell paralyzes our sense of taste, as we can prove with three experiments, easily accomplished by anyone.

First experiment: A terrible head cold wipes out an eater’s sense of taste. She tastes nothing, even though her tongue is functioning perfectly normally.

Second experiment: If an eater pinches his nostrils, his sense of taste becomes faint and imperfect. He can easily swallow the nastiest medicine in this way . . .

These effects stem from the same cause: the lack of input from our sense of smell. As a result we appreciate only a food’s juices and not its smells.

## V: Why, according to Brillat-Savarin, is taste so Important?

However, taste as Nature has endowed us with is still that one of our senses which gives us the greatest joy:

1. Because the pleasure of eating is the only one which, indulged in moderately, is not followed by regret;
2. Because it is common to all periods in history, all ages of man, and all social conditions;
3. Because it recurs of necessity at least once every day, and can be repeated without inconvenience two or three times in that space of hours;
4. Because it can mingle with all the other pleasures, and even console us for their absence;



