

Vignette: The Fullness of Taste

Jane Kenway

What does privilege taste like? Is there a link between the palate and the palette? Is taste tinted? Tainted?

High on the slopes of the mountain in Cape Town, is Greystone with its 'award-winning, architect-designed' pre-preparatory school for girls from 3 to 6 years of age. No classroom has more than 24 students. This light filled, spacious school also has a 'child-friendly, landscaped garden environment'¹. Playground equipment is crafted to look like Africa's wild animals. Multi-coloured frescos, murals, learning equipment and beanbags add charm. Even the toilets have a designer touch; multi-shaded, carefully matched small tiles, quirky angles, artfully arranged basins. White spots adorn the girls' red aprons worn to protect their pale blue peter-pan collared uniforms. The mothers too adore colour. Their dazzlingly joyful Mad-Hatter's Tea Party tables are festooned with flowers, balloons, candles and draped beads. One table has fine china with delicate pastel floral patterns and quaint candelabrum. For their ballet performances the girls wear pale pink, but elsewhere vivid pink is their colour. In the passageway their school bags, lunch boxes and water bottles are predominantly pink and red. In the playground a pink and blue cubby house awaits. And at the Mad-Hatter's Tea Party there are copious servings of heart-shaped biscuits, iced in pink and red, and decorated with little silver balls and swirls of purple and glitter.

To me, this school tastes pink. Sweet.

On a flat and dusty street of downtown Cape Town, is a government school attended by black children from the townships. Facilities are well kept but basic, school 'décor' is restricted to the front lobby. Assemblies are held outside on the hard earth, under a rare tree. There are roughly 60 students in each crowded

¹ These quotations are from the school's website.

J. Kenway (✉)
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: jane.kenway@monash.edu

classroom—all eager. The school provides students a lunch of mieliepap. Made from mielie-meal this porridge/polenta is a staple food of South Africa's many poor. Inexpensive, eaten with vegetables, it is their everyday food. In a small, hot, smoky shed at the school two elderly, tired, women stand for the morning stirring and watching over two big vats in which the mieliepap is boiled. High in carbohydrates and protein and quite low in fat, it is filling and reasonably nutritious. In its more up-market version, in the fashionable cafes on the hillside near Greystone, mieliepap is accompanied by meat, vegetables or a savoury sauce, or, in homes that can afford meat, it is served as a side dish at *braais* (barbecues). To these hungry children, however, it is dispensed unaccompanied, but liberally. It is filling. On its own, dull-white and stodgy, it is humble and unappealing fare.

To me this school tastes tenacious. Gritty.

There are two main types of taste. First there is taste-bud taste, tongue taste—sweet, sour, salty, savoury (umami) and bitter. Secondly there is life-style taste. This may be associated with those perceived as distinguished, cultured, or stylish, those with breeding, those who can make refined judgments. They have impeccable taste, not simply, the more modest, good taste. On the other hand there are those seen to lack taste, to have no taste, poor or bad taste; those who lack judgment, refinement, civility, who are uncultured. In both instances taste is associated with things, appearances and behavior.

Lifestyle taste is not always straightforward. Good taste, too visibly or carefully cultivated, can be a bad sign; a sign of anxious social striving, of not having quite arrived. Further, while the distinguished can have momentary lapses and behave in ways considered to be in poor taste, the undistinguished cannot, it seems, have lapses of impeccable taste. As this suggests, lifestyle taste is ordered hierarchically.

In addition though, taste-bud taste and lifestyle taste cannot be readily separated. The thing of food, its aesthetics and the act of eating are, together, implicated in hierarchies of taste. The food one eats, its look, where one eats, how and even why are often socially, as well as ethnically, coded. The class codes, for example, of fast food and fine dining, processed foods and whole foods are readily readable. Scarcity boosts price.

Of course these class codes are also scripted. 'Taste classifies and classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 6). This well-known aphorism reminds us that taste always has its cultural intermediaries—those who assess, ascribe and guide values and value. They can be regarded as the arbiters of what, in many ways, is culturally arbitrary.

Taste is also tainted. Mega-corporations control much of the world's food production and distribution. They target for profit the addictive tastes of the tongue—fat, salt and sugar. Yet the poor may be stigmatised for their unhealthy food/lifestyle choices (Patel 2008). And with its links to the slave trade from Africa and to slavery on the sugar plantations of the West Indies in the eighteenth century, sugar's history leaves a bitter after-taste. There is nothing arbitrary about the link between food and poverty; it involves the tastes of necessity under-pinned by an economy where scarcity is a norm not a choice signaling superiority. Poverty does not have many tasteful food affordances.

References

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Jane Kenway is Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow, Professor of Global Education Studies at Monash University, Australia, and an elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, Australia. Her research expertise is in socio-cultural studies of education in the context of wider social and cultural change. Her more recent jointly edited books are *Asia as Method in Education Studies: A Defiant Research Imagination*, (Routledge 2015) and *Globalising the Research Imagination* (Routledge 2009). Her more recent jointly written books are *Masculinity Beyond the Metropolis* (Palgrave 2006) and *Haunting the Knowledge Economy* (Routledge 2006). She has published numerous book chapters and journal articles. She leads the international team conducting the research project called *Elite independent schools in globalising circumstances: a multi-sited global ethnography*.

In the Realm of the Senses

Social Aesthetics and the Sensory Dynamics of Privilege

Fahey, J.; Prosser, H.; Shaw, M. (Eds.)

2015, IX, 211 p. 134 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-287-349-1