

number of participants who decided to add vinegar to their beer. For the participants in the “after” condition, the beer with vinegar didn’t taste too bad the first time around (they apparently reasoned), and so they didn’t mind giving it another try.*

AS YOU SEE, expectations can influence nearly every aspect of our life. Imagine that you need to hire a caterer for your daughter’s wedding. Josephine’s Catering boasts about its “delicious Asian-style ginger chicken” and its “flavorful Greek salad with kalamata olives and feta cheese.” Another caterer, Culinary Sensations, offers a “succulent organic breast of chicken roasted to perfection and drizzled with a merlot demi-glace, resting in a bed of herbed Israeli cous-cous” and a “mélange of the freshest roma cherry tomatoes and crisp field greens, paired with a warm circle of chèvre in a fruity raspberry vinaigrette.”

Although there is no way to know whether Culinary Sensations’ food is any better than Josephine’s, the sheer depth of the description may lead us to expect greater things from the simple tomato and goat cheese salad. This, accordingly, increases the chance that we (and our guests, if we give them the description of the dish) will rave over it.

This principle, so useful to caterers, is available to everyone. We can add small things that sound exotic and fashionable to our cooking (chipotle-mango sauces seem all the rage right now, or try buffalo instead of beef). These ingredients might not make the dish any better in a blind taste test; but

*We were also hoping to measure the amount of vinegar students added to the beer. But everyone who added vinegar added the exact amount specified in the recipe.