

# “What is this?”: Multisensorial explorations of food with and without sight

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between sensorial experiences and language during food consumption has been investigated in a diversity of settings and activities, showing a variety of sensorial practices and possible ways of discursively expressing them. In this paper, we focus specifically on activities where individuals encounter unfamiliar food, suspending expected synaesthetic associations between sensory features. Using audio and video recordings of dinner interactions in restaurants offering high-end creative cuisine and dining experiences in complete darkness, we show how the participants move from eating to tasting and engage in a multisensorial exploration of the food, where sight is either absent or insufficient to solve the puzzle of what it is they are eating. We find that this exploration commonly begins with a recurring interactional practice: the question “what is this?”, initiating a sequence that reveals a public collective engagement with the food among participants. Drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, we investigate the sequential environments in which “what is this?” prototypically occurs, the various actions it implements, its turn design (displaying a more or less unknowing stance), as well as how it is subsequently responded to within the participants’ project of identifying the food. We examine how the “what is this?” inquiry mobilizes various linguistic resources, in a way that is deeply embedded in multisensorial examinations of the food that are (made) available to co-participants, publicly seeable in high-end gastronomic restaurants, and publicly hearable in dark restaurants. Our findings contribute to naturalistic interactional research on commensality and multisensoriality, with particular relevance for scholarship addressing the primacy and limitations of sight.

## 1. Introduction

Food experiences are inherently multisensorial, engaging all the senses, and linguistic, involving the understanding, identification, and categorization of food and food qualities. This encompasses the physiological sense of edibility and health, the pleasure of eating and drinking, and the culture and socialization of taste. This paper tackles the sensorial appreciation of food and its identification as they emerge and are achieved in and through social interaction, addressing the sociality and intersubjectivity of eating and tasting. More particularly, it addresses the interplay of sensoriality and linguistic description of dishes and ingredients as they are revealed within two meal experiences in which the identification or recognition of food is made difficult: in upscale gastronomic restaurants, where unknown and unconventional food presentations challenge the senses, and in restaurants offering dining experiences in complete darkness, hindering the ability to visually identify food. Whereas in ordinary food consumption participants might not always pay attention to their sensorial experiences, these particular settings foster their attention on food, and therefore reveal the distinctive importance of sensorial and linguistic practices through which participants collectively experiment, analyze, and formulate the contribution of the senses to their food experience. When patrons are confronted with food that is not straightforwardly identifiable,

recognizable, and categorizable, they find themselves consistently inquiring about what they are eating, notably with the question “what is this?”. Such inquiries underscore the relevance and expectation for the participants to know what they are eating. The inquiry connects their sensorial access to the food with their ability to articulate, in so many words, what the food is, highlighting the relevance of the intersubjectivity and sociality of food experiences. How these inquiries play out in interaction reveals the distinctive role of different senses and the way they provide—or fail to provide—grounds for answering the question, as well as the contribution of the details of talk and vocalizations in building the intelligibility of food experiences.

## 2. Background: food, sensoriality, and language

Food consumption, whether during everyday meals at home, restaurant dining, or tasting sessions, hinges not only on the senses but also on language. By contrast to the view that the senses are primarily physiological and private, socio-anthropological perspectives highlight their social, cultural, and normative dimensions (Howes, 2024). Consequently, language and talk are fundamental for securing the intersubjective and shared character of sensorial experiences (Levinson & Majid, 2014).

This paper adopts an ethnomethodological and conversation analytic

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(EMCA) approach to sensoriality (Lieberman, 2022; Mondada, 2021), focusing on the *practices* of sensing as they are embedded within locally situated activities and courses of action in interaction. Sensing practices are positioned and acquire their meaning within the emerging sequentially organized temporality of social interaction. They are embodied, and thus observable and intelligible for others; they contribute to current actions, and are responded to by others, who may also be engaged in sensing or not. The embeddedness of sensorial practices within talk-and-embodiment-in-interaction grounds their intersubjectivity. In other words, the senses are not used in isolation when encountering some food. Rather, they are mobilized within the ongoing interaction, in which participants orient to specific qualities and features of the food currently being shared as relevant for what they are doing, and together make sense of them. Their sensorial engagement is shared and collective, yet it may generate divergent outcomes, which can be further negotiated, debated, and sometimes resolved in interaction.

Several EMCA studies explored how, in social interaction, sensorial engagements ground the identification, recognition, and categorization of food, as well as their multimodal expression (i.e., not only through talk but also gesture, gaze, head orientations, body postures, etc.). Importantly, the relation between sensorial engagement and its public expression depends on the situated activity in which participants are involved. For instance, tasting sessions constitute a social, institutional activity where participants are normatively expected to produce standardized lexical descriptions (Fele, 2019; Lieberman, 2022; Mondada, 2020, 2024), rather than response cries, for example, manifesting their subjective judgement (Mondada, 2019). Moreover, the sensorial access to samples in tasting sessions is organized in a distinctive way, analytically and normatively separating the ordered contribution of different senses (Mondada 2024). In other activities, by contrast, the sensorial appraisal might be more holistic. During an ordinary meal, the participants typically do not conduct a detailed lexical analysis of the sensorial features of a dish, but rather produce response cries (Goffman, 1978), gustatory “mms” (Wiggins, 2002), sounds of disgust (Wiggins & Keevallik, 2023), and assessments (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Wiggins, 2014). Across activities and settings, the sensorial access to food/food samples is specifically designed according to specific organizational formats of social interaction, which allows for distinctions between eating practices and tasting practices (Mondada 2023).

So, the organization of social interaction is adjusted to both specific sensorial practices and specific forms of verbalization. Moreover, in some settings, sensorial access may be restricted: for example, in cheese shops, touching and smelling products is often prohibited due to hygiene concerns, although exceptions may be made by the seller who also offers tasting samples (Mondada, 2021). Similarly, at the market, access to products can be limited by sellers (Weatherall et al., 2022). This can lead to tensions with customers claiming entitlement to not only look at but also touch products for evaluation, where they contend that the appealing appearance of certain products might not correspond to their actual maturity, texture, or taste, orienting to possible discrepancies between different sensorial accesses (Mondada, 2022). Thus, the uneven distribution of possibilities, rights, and obligations to sensorially access food reveals epistemic and normative expectations relative to the specific contribution of different senses, which surface and might be debated in interaction. This can engender limited trust in vision when it comes to choosing fruits at the market, for example. By contrast, in ordinary synaesthetic expectations one can feel the sourness of the lemon while looking at its yellow colour (Sartre, 1978: 186, cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 238). Activities and moments in which discrepancies between

sensorial experiences emerge in interaction constitute “perspicuous settings” (Garfinkel, 2002) for examining how participants locally address and formulate issues such as the convergence or divergence between sensorial experiences, coherent or contradictory sensations, or puzzling relations between sensorial access and categorization of the accessed object. The meals in gastronomic and dark restaurants constitute such perspicuous settings: they offer experiences in which ordinary synaesthetic associations either do not work anymore or are hindered by the absence of vision. They reveal how participants locally focus on their senses in material circumstances in which vision is either irrelevant or absent. In these environments, participants engage in an inquiry about ingredients, sensory features, and gastronomic preparations by asking questions like “what is this?”, in an effort to solve the puzzle of what it is they might be eating.

“What is this?” is a question that prompts a multisensorial exploration of the food at hand, shifting the focus from *eating* to *tasting*; instead of simply consuming the food, it is tasted with a sense of inquiry, which strongly intertwines sensorial exploration with language. The question seeks a response based on the sensorial access to the food, prompting a description of the dish or its ingredients. “What is this?” shows the relevance for participants to a meal to identify what they are eating. As a question, it implies an orientation to the possible intersubjectivity of the sensing experience and its expressibility, expecting a response from another participant. “What is this?” thus connects sensoriality and language in important ways. Moreover, the question can be posed across various food-related contexts and activities (not to forget other non-food related settings, such as inspecting rocks by geologists, Goodwin, 2018), and the response it might get also varies depending on the constraints, expectations, and normativities inherent to each context.

“What is this?” is a question that has been used as a methodological tool by researchers in experimental settings to elicit the vocabulary of taste from informants. Simultaneously, it is a common spontaneous question in everyday interactions. In the former context, it reveals the scientific interest of the researcher; in the latter context, it reveals the local vernacular orientations of the participants. The question played an important role in the first anthropological and psychological investigations of the senses, carried on in ethnographic expeditions in the early 20th century: it was addressed to local speakers of Algonquian languages by Chamberlain (1903), in the Torres Strait by Myers (1904), and among the Todas in Southern India by Rivers (1905), together with the administration of a sample to taste, in order to elicit vocabularies of taste in specific languages and cultures. The results paved the way for the first cross-cultural comparative studies of taste lexicons. Similar questions were used one century later by Senft (2012) together with a “stimuli kit” for eliciting the lexicon of taste in the Trobriand Islands, and by Majid et al. (2018) for the lexicon of olfaction across cultures. Within other experimental set-ups, the question was used by Lehrer to investigate the wine lexicon in English (1983/2009). It is also used in sensory sciences for establishing cross-cultural comparisons and accessing different customers’ preferences and tastes (e.g., O’Mahony & Alba, 1980), as well as for building standardized sensory lexicons for the food industry (e.g., Lawless & Civille, 2013). In other, non-experimental, social settings, the question is recurrently used by speakers confronted with unknown food: in gourmet shops by novice customers facing numerous unknown varieties of cheese specialties (Mondada, 2021), in bakeries by customers looking at various bread varieties from across the counter, unable to infer their ingredients solely through vision (Harjunpää et al., 2023), as well as in experimental meal settings where diners are invited to taste unfamiliar food (Szatrowski 2019).

### 3. Data and analytical approach

This paper is based on analyses of two distinct settings in which participants experience unfamiliar food: a dark restaurant and an upscale gastronomic establishment. In the dark restaurant, participants encounter ordinary food items, yet the lack of visibility complicates their identification. Conversely, the upscale gastronomic restaurant presents creative cuisine that engages all senses, but potentially makes identification challenging due to the originality of its combination and presentation. So, both settings pose challenges to the senses, prompting participants to frequently inquire “what is this?” within their talk.

The analysis is primarily concerned with a corpus of 10 h of audio recordings collected in a dark restaurant in German-speaking Switzerland, where sighted patrons eat and drink in pitch-black dining rooms. The dark restaurant (introduced as the first of its kind in Switzerland in 1999) is staffed by visually impaired people who navigate patrons through the unlit environment, providing guidance throughout the experience of dining and socializing without sight. The establishment’s mission is to offer employment opportunities to the blind and visually impaired while simultaneously raising awareness about the blind experience. Most patrons opt for the surprise menu, i.e. a three- or four-course meal with undisclosed dishes. These dishes combine diverse ingredients in non-traditional recipes, inviting patrons to discover and puzzle out their composition. Dark dinners thus present a perspicuous setting for exploring the role of the senses when vision is absent: the practical inquiries patrons engage in, questioning what they are eating, reveal how puzzling the identification of food can be in such contexts of modified sensoriality and perception.

The analyses also include some extracts from a corpus of video recordings collected in an upscale gastronomic restaurant in France. The patrons are young people from German-speaking Switzerland, not used to creative cuisine. They are offered a surprise menu, in which each serving consists of two different dishes randomly distributed among the participants. Even if in this context participants engage with the food using all their senses, including sight, they face the challenge of not recognizing—on the basis of visual access—what it is they are eating and tasting. This is accentuated by what Adrià, inspired by Derrida, termed “deconstruction,” a form of gastronomic cuisine introduced in the mid-90s: it consists in disaggregating the elements of a conventional dish, manipulating its visual appearance, shape, texture, and temperature, while keeping and intensifying the flavor of the original products (Adrià, 1997: 86). In this way, “by deconstructing the soup so that its components were discrete entities exposed on the plate, he [Adrià] initiated a process of inquiry—What are our expectations of food?” (Abend, 2011: 175). Gastronomic experiences disrupt ordinary synaesthetic expectations and associations, generating an inquiry that is implemented in the question *what is this?*—our focal point in the present paper. As our analysis will show, although the presentation of the dishes in the high-end restaurant insists on their visual characteristics—contrary to dining in the dark, which makes vision impossible—, a deconstructed gastronomic dish disrupts the ability to visually identify the components of the meal. In both cases, participants experience the limits of vision (Mondada, 2024b). In both cases participants are invited to engage in a material ecology that generates a “breaching experiment” (Garfinkel, 2002), that is, an experience suspending and questioning the normative sensorial synaesthetic expectations people have while engaging in usual activities.

Both types of data have been collected with the written informed consent of the participants; in the second case, where video recordings have been made, the informed consent explicitly included the agreement allowing researchers to use non-anonymized images in scientific publications.

In both the dark restaurant and the high-end gastronomic restaurant, our challenge as researchers consists in documenting the sensorial practices of the participants, relying on audio and video materials that are then transcribed. While the participants’ embodied conduct offers

adequate evidence in the case of video recordings (Mondada, 2021), the issue is more complex in the case of audio recordings (video was neither possible nor relevant in total darkness). Here, embodied conduct is reconstructed—both by the analysts as well as locally and endogenously by the participants themselves—on the basis of its audible characteristics, which include not only verbal contributions but also vocalizations (Keevallik & Ogen, 2020). Consequently, in the transcripts, we are particularly careful in indicating the audible details that are publicly available to the co-present participants, as they serve as inferential bases for making their conduct accountable and coordinatable. Thus, we focus on the hearable dimension of embodied actions, which reveals the action itself. However, unless it has a sounding dimension or auditory cues, the participants’ action is not directly observable to us and therefore eludes more precise description (e.g., smelling, tongue movements in the mouth, swallowing, touching and grasping of food, etc.). Consequently, actions in the dark are inferred, much like they are for the participants, based on their witnessable (and partially orchestrated) sound qualities.

### 4. Analysis: troubles in identifying food

Presented with an unfamiliar dish they struggle to recognize and categorize, the participants recurrently produce the question “what is this?”, targeting a detail of the dish. A collection (Schegloff, 2007) of instances of *was ist das?* / “what is this” has been assembled, drawing on the observation that this question is frequently asked, particularly at the beginning of the meal or course, in a way that appears to take precedence over any other action or ongoing actions (such as properly eating the dish). The analysis targets the possible environments in which “what is this?” is uttered, in order to identify the action(s) it performs. The question can initiate a new sequence in an environment where no other talk is going on, but it can also emerge at any moment, occasioned by the participants’ constant focus on what they are eating and tasting.

“What is this?” instantiates an endogenous inquiry into food, sensoriality, and language. It is a practice through which the participants locally address the conditions and difficulties of categorizing and describing-in-so-many-words an object in the world; it contributes to the analysis of food practices and meaning-making in food-related activities; it mobilizes the co-participants to solve the puzzle, and it crucially involves having sensorial access to the targeted item, which can be unevenly distributed among the participants. In this sense, it constitutes a case of interactional semantics (Deppermann, 2011; Deppermann & De Stefani, 2024). More particularly, it draws on a multimodal multi-sensorial interactional semantics (Mondada, 2024a): the question mobilizes embodied conduct and sensoriality, for tentatively assembling a response, and this mobilization in turn reveals both usual synaesthetic expectations and how they can be breached in a context of sensorial deprivation. The response constitutes an attempt to adequately categorize (Sacks, 1992) food items, ingredients, and flavors by drawing on different levels of granularity, displaying more or less epistemic authority, based on sensory primacy. As we will see, this implicates a continuum of categorization work, ranging from the most specific category (“pumpkin”) to the most generic and tentative one (“kind of something”). Unlike in other forms of inquiries and discoveries (Garfinkel et al., 1981), these categories are not progressively or methodically ordered, but instead can alternate without building on or capitalizing on previous outcomes.

Our analysis is organized into two main sections. The first part highlights contrastive cases, demonstrating that participants’ identification and categorization of food can be straightforward and unproblematic in both settings, with and without the use of sight (§ 5.1), yet can also pose challenges and more consequential difficulties (§ 5.2), showing similarities across the two settings. In the second part (§ 6), we zoom in on the turn design of “what is this?” and its variants and how they are subsequently responded to in various sequential trajectories, showing how participants address the encountered sensorial troubles and various actions they implement through the question.

## 5. “What is this?” as a recurrent question across settings

### 5.1. Straightforward identifications of the food at hand

In ordinary dinner conversations, participants can talk about many things and engage in a diversity of social activities unrelated to food (e.g., C. Goodwin, 1981, M.H. Goodwin, 1997, Mondada, 2009). The gastronomic experience in high-end restaurants, by contrast, invites patrons to focus on the food and its sensorial characteristics, going beyond minimal gustatory *mms* (Wiggins, 2002) and subjective assessments (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Wiggins, 2014), and instead making relevant a description of what is being experienced (like in tasting sessions, Mondada, 2020; 2024a). In other words, while the former setting often privileges *eating*, the latter invites *tasting* the food (Hennion, 2005; Mondada, 2023a).

Vision is crucial for accessing food items before engaging with them. Vision, unlike touch for example, can operate from a distance, and this allows one participant to visually explore the dish of another participant. Vision, therefore, serves as the basic sense that initiates the gastronomic inquiry and can be sufficient to address the simple yet fundamental question “what is this?”, like in the following extract:

#### Extract 1. (IPB/Dv12-08.4.55)

```
1      (1.1) • (0.5) # (1.5) * (0.5)
    fio  >>digging into a smaller plate->
    car  *turns head twd FIO->
    car  y      *bends over->
    fig  #fig.1
```



```
2      CAR  was isch #das?=nudle?
    fig  what is this noodles
    fig  #fig.2
3      (0.3)
4      FIO  j:a.
    yes
5      *(0.2)
    car  ->*, , , , , ->>
6      CAR  a:h.
    oh
    ->*, , , , ->
```

Carola turns her head towards Fiona’s dish and stares at it for a few seconds in silence (l. 1) while Fiona is digging into her dish trying to grasp some fine spaghetti-like filaments with her fork (FOig. 1). As Fiona is still engaged with them, Carola asks the question *was isch das?* / “what is this”, immediately followed by a possible candidate, *nudle* / “noodles” (l. 2). She still keeps her body orientation towards the dish, which makes the indexical expression *das* / “this” interpretable. Fiona’s response is affirmative, without any further elaboration (l. 4). Carola withdraws from her visual orientation, coming back to her initial torso position and looking away (l. 5–6). So, Carola is here able to infer from her visual access what the dish is. The fact that the candidate is uttered without any pause, within one prosodic contour, displays some certainty, although still leaving the primary sensory-epistemic access to Fiona, to whom the request for confirmation is addressed. In this case, the object is categorized in plain common words (“noodles”), in an unproblematic manner, and not treated as a gastronomic curiosity.

Even when vision is not available, participants can engage in a

similar sequence, as shown in the fragment below taken from the dark restaurant. Three friends have just been seated and they begin to nibble at the amuse-bouche:

#### Extract 2. (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:06:15)

```
1      SOL  mega fein. (.) hhh
    mega delicious
2      (1.3)
3      TAT  ↑MM::
4      (0.6)
5      TAT  was isch das?=tomate?
    what is this tomato
6      (1.3)
7      SOL  ich glaubes.
    I think so
8      (0.2)
9      JAY  mm:: (0.2) ja s’isch tomate ja.
    yes it is tomato yes
10     (0.5)
11     TAT  HHH
12     (0.4)
13     JAY  |mouth full|
    |mit nüss. |
    with nuts
```

Solange’s positive assessment (l. 1) presupposes that sensory access has been established, creating a common attentional focus on the amuse-bouche that the participants are sharing. Tatjana’s gustatory ↑*MM*:: (l. 3) expresses enjoyment and displays an ongoing tasting experience. On this basis, the referent of the indexical *das* in the following question *was isch das?* = *tomate?* / “what is this? = tomato?” (l. 5) is unproblematically shared among the participants. After a lapse, Solange responds with *ich glaubes* / “I think so” (l. 7). The delay in responding to Tatjana’s inquiry can be locally interpreted as the time Solange takes to access the referent, allowing her to produce an adequate response. Jay, in turn, exhibits his access with a gustatory *mm*:: (l. 9), grounding his categorization of the food. His aligning response (l. 9) is not merely a repetition of what Tatjana has said, but indicates independent access (*ja s’ich tomate ja* / “yes it’s tomato yes”). Moreover, he displays a strong degree of agency by eventually expanding on the description (*mit nüss* / “with nuts”), showcasing his ongoing sensorial engagement with the dish as the turn is recognizably produced with his mouth full.

In this way, the participants manage to make their embodied sensory access audibly, and thus publicly, available. This enables a common focus of attention on a shared referent, and grounds the production of the candidate in the question as well as the descriptions in the responses. In this case, the conditions of tasting in the dark are managed by the participants in and through the sequential organization and the formatting of their contributions. Turns-at-talk are audibly embodied: the sensorial practices and their outcomes pervade the organization of the turns and make them accountable as not just concurrent with sensoriality but also grounded and legitimated by it.

In both extracts, showing both a sighted and unsighted dining experience, the participant initiating the “what is this?” sequence produces it by immediately latching on with a candidate guess, thereby displaying a straightforward expectation while at the same time relying on others to confirm it.

### 5.2. Difficulties to identify the food at hand

Contrary to the above instances of “what is this?”, identifying the dish can be considerably more challenging for the participants—in both settings. Consider the following fragment taken from the dark restaurant: a couple, Alex and Mireille, has just received an amuse-bouche, and engages in a case of what might be termed “identifying for the other:”

#### Extract 3. (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:46:08/263–278)



1 MIR chasch du: teschte was es isch? (.) hhh heh heh  
 can you test what it is  
 ((6 lines omitted; ALE gets hold of the amuse-bouche))  
 8 MIR [ h ] heh [hhh]  
 9 ALE [.tsk] [.tsk]  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 ALE mm? (.) .tsk >was isch das?< (0.6) .tsk irgend e sone  
 what is this some sort of  
 12 sauce öppis,  
 sauce something  
 13 (1.9)  
 14 ALE .tsk (0.6) mm. (0.2) .tsk (0.4) >was isch das?  
 what is this  
 =hani au scho gha,<  
 I've also had this before  
 15 (1.7)  
 16 ALE isch pervers wenns nit ↑gsehsch weisch nit was es isch.  
 it's perverse if you don't see you don't know what it is


Mireille challenges Alex with the here-and-now request for action (Deppermann & Gubina, 2021) *chasch du: teschte was es isch?* / “can you test what it is?” (l. 1), *es* / “it” referring to the hors d'œuvre. The request for “testing” is produced for the benefit of the requester (Clayman & Heritage, 2014), and the phrasing that Mireille uses highlights that she is primarily concerned with identifying what it is they are about to eat, rather than tasting the dish and collectively debating on its flavor profiles. Alex complies immediately by getting hold of the amuse-bouche (not reproduced) and then attempting to describe on-line what he is tasting and sensing (l. 11 ff.). Notably, his sensory access is displayed to Mireille through lip smacks (Wiggins & Keevallik, 2021) (here transcribed as .tsk; l. 9, 11, 14) and gustatory *mms* (Wiggins, 2002) (l. 11, 14). Of note is that the gustatory *mms* are delivered in both an upwardly intoned (l. 11) and downwardly intoned (l. 14) fashion, as if to indicate an emergent familiarity with the food being eaten despite an inability to precisely identify it. These sound objects make Alex' sensorial experience publicly accountable (Mondada, 2020, 2021; 2023b), and together with the recycled *was isch das?* question and self-talk concerning possible candidates (l. 11, 14) enable us to see how the occasioned tasting is recognizably designed for Mireille. While Alex identifies the appetizer first as “some sort of sauce something” (l. 11), he is struggling to adequately categorize the dish, eventuating in an account in which he explicitly topicalizes the absence of sight: *isch pervers wenns nit ↑gsehsch weisch nit was es isch.* / “it's perverse if you don't see you don't know what it is” (l. 16).

This extract is exemplary in making observable how the intersubjectivity of the sensorial practices is achieved: sensory sounds like .tsk and *mms* are audibly produced for the co-participant and in response to the initial query; they permeate the turn, much like when speaking with one's mouth full, thereby displaying direct access to the food and warranting the description provided about ingredients and experiences. For us analysts—also in the dark—, like for the co-participants, this reveals the ongoing (invisible) sensorial actions at play, bolstering the accountability of the sequential unfolding of the exchange. Consequently, this underscores the importance of transcribing the sounds that form the basis of the participants' inferential work concerning possible embodied sensations, rather than inserting in the transcript the embodied actions that remain invisible to any participant.


In the gastronomic restaurant, sighted and seeing participants can find themselves equally perplexed. The availability of sight may not always be sufficient to solve the puzzle, despite enabling a shared identification of the questioned referent, here on the basis of its yellow color (l. 2, 4):

Extract 4.1. (IPB/Dv12-04\_0.09.04)


1 # (2.0) \* (2.0) + (0.3)  
 bea >>stares at her dish/yellow piece+looks twd DEB->  
 deb \*dips a vegetable in the yellow sauce->  
 fig #fig.3



2 BEA hesch+ [du jetzt das prob#iert das: %+ älh: gälbe?  
 have you now tried it this ehm yellow  
 3 (CAR) [ich ha alles gern xx.]  
 I like everything xx  
 bea ->+bends over D's dish-----+observes->  
 fio #appr D'plate w fork->  
 fig #fig.4  
 4 DEB s gäle? [mhm.  
 the yellow one mhm  
 5 FIO [was% isch# [das do?  
 what is this here  
 6 BEA [was isch das?=  
 what is this  
 fio ->%fork on orange veg->  
 fig #fig.5



7 DEB =i i %weiss \$nid. [chas nid-  
 I I don't know can't-  
 8 CAR \$ [ei wohrschindlich {odr?  
 egg probably right  
 9 DEB [näi.  
 no  
 car \$bends twd DEB, and looks->  
 fio ->%takes orange veg with her fork->



10 Fig (1.0) #  
 #fig.6  
 11 DEB nid in% (di\$esser- % [xx)  
 not in (this) xx  
 12 CAR [\$>kürbis.<  
 pumpkin  
 fio ->%lks%in mouth%  
 car -> \$withdraws->  
 13 (1.0) \* | (0.9) \* |  
 deb ->\*puts veg into her mouth\*  
 ann |puts bite of green food in mouth|

Bea has been staring at her own dish for some time, fixated on an untouched yellow sphere (l. 1, Fig.3). She then shifts her bodily

orientation toward Debbie, leans toward her dish, and sees that Debbie's sphere has liquefied, with Debbie using a fork to dip a vegetable in its yellow sauce (Fig.4). Bea is thus able to establish a correspondence between her (still intact) sphere and the sauce Debbie is using for her vegetable. Bea's question *hesch du jetz das probiert das: äh: gälbe?*/"have you now tried it this ehm yellow" (l. 2) treats "the yellow" as a visually recognizable item. The use of *jetz*/"now" suggests the possibility that it might have already been tasted, given its current liquefied state. Thus, Bea treats Debbie as having not only visual access to it (like her) but also primary sensorial access, possibly from previous tasting. Debbie responds (l. 4) by merely repeating the color reference and confirming that she has tried it, without specifying the nature of the yellow sauce. This prompts Bea to inquire *was isch das?*/"what is this" (l. 6), in an attempt to identify the yellow sauce.

Meanwhile, Fiona initiates a new unrelated sequence: she approaches her fork to Debbie's plate (l. 3) and hovers it above another vegetable (Fig.5), timed to coincide with *was isch das do?*/"what is this here" (l. 5). She then picks up the vegetable without waiting for Debbie's response (l. 7–8). So, two participants are shown to launch a similar sequence by asking a question about the referent of the deictic demonstrative *das*/"this", referring to two different objects—one looked at by Bea and the other pointed at by Fiona's fork. This highlights the extensive use of such inquiries in the context of a gastronomic food exploration.

Whereas Fiona's question is left unanswered (and indeed might be used to legitimize her taking food from a co-participant's plate), Bea's question is responded to by Debbie, who claims to know the referent, followed by an emergent second disclaimer using a negative modal verb (l. 7). Despite Debbie having primary multisensorial access to the item referred to by *das*/"that"—including visual and tactile access from opening and liquefying the sphere, and possibly gustatory access from previous tasting (note, however, that it is uncertain whether Bea has witnessed this)—she offers an "I don't know" response. By contrast, Carola, who has been served a different dish and is sitting in front of Debbie, leans over her plate (l. 8, Fig. 6) and then, solely relying on visual access, produces a guess (*ei wohrschindlich oder?*/"egg probably right", l. 8). Although the guess is modalized by the adverb and the final tag, her turn begins with the initial candidate "egg." Thus, she treats visual access as providing a reasonably reliable basis for proffering a candidate answer to Bea's question. However, Debbie immediately rejects the guess with a straightforward, minimal, and firm negative token manifesting her primacy and authority on the matter (l. 9). This is further elaborated (l. 11) but Carola, in overlap, produces another candidate (*> kurbis. < /*"pumpkin", l. 12), while withdrawing her gaze and thus treating the sequence as closed (for her). Debbie does not respond and proceeds to put the vegetable she has dipped in the yellow sauce in her mouth. From this point on, she refrains from addressing the reference and the taste of the item. So, Carola's guesses are all based on the synaesthetic correspondence between certain ingredients (egg, pumpkin) and the yellow color. However, Debbie, with direct haptic access to the ingredients, dismisses these guesses outright. This highlights that sight alone is insufficient to make sense of the spherification in this context.

The fragment continues with Carola now turning to another participant sitting next to her and addressing the same "what is this?" question (l. 14):

#### Extract 4.2.

```

13      (0.5) $ (0.5) | (0.9) |
      car      $looks at her plate->
      ann      |puts bite of green food in mouth|
14 CAR      und $was isch das bi uns?
      and what is this in our case
      car      ->$looks twd ANN's plate->
15      (0.5)
16 ANN      das +sind noi:x s- sin #saint jac$ques± do.+
      these are noix s- are saint-jacques here
      ann      +taps w fork-----+
      ann      ±lks CAR->
      car      ->$lks her plate->>
      fig      #fig.7

17      (0.6)
18 CAR      saint jacques.± [chas im fall immer noni sage.
      saint-jacques.      can actually still not say
19 ANN      [sind irgendwelchi muschle.
      are some sort of clams
      ann      ->±

20      £(2.4)
      car      £picks a bit of green ingredient w fork->
21 ANN      oder sunst irgendöpis komischs. °(glaub i).°
      or something else strange I think
21      £(0.7)£
      car      ->fin mouthf
      |mouth full-----|
22 CAR      |mit spinat hä.
      with spinach PRT
23      (0.5)
24 ANN      hm?
25      (0.6)
26 CAR      und+ spina±t.+
      and spinach
      ann      +takes a bite+
      ann      ±looks at her dish->>
      (8.5)

```



Carola first looks at her plate and then turns to Ann, who has been served the same dish, asking *und was isch das bi uns?*/"and what is this in our case" (l. 14). Being *and*-prefaced, the question is produced as a continuation of the prior activity—emphasizing its relevance for all participants around the table. The question is also specified as regarding "our case" or "our group," referring to the fact that the six participants were randomly assigned two types of dishes. This further points to the legitimacy of inquiring about the contents of both groups' dishes, thereby systematizing the inquiry initiated within the first group around Debbie's dish. Similar to how Bea inspected her plate before turning to Debbie's, Carola does the same with Ann. She can see that Ann has already begun eating the item targeted by the demonstrative *das*/"this", which provides grounds for legitimizing Ann as a knowledgeable participant capable of providing an answer. Indeed, Ann answers by naming the referent (l. 16) while tapping the relevant item with her fork (FOig.7), displaying a certainty grounded in her sensorial primacy.

Carola, who has not yet eaten the item, repeats the name given by Ann, while adding a disclaimer of knowledge (l. 18). In overlap, Ann

gives an informal description (l. 19), either orienting to Carola's repetition as displaying not knowing what Saint-Jacques are or to the referent as possibly being a sort of clam, using a superordinate category for describing them (l. 19). Carola takes a bite of the same ingredient while Ann adds an alternative description (l. 21) that further conveys a sense of uncertainty, qualified with *glaub i*/"I think". Ann's previously somewhat affirmative description (l. 16) thus becomes increasingly vague and hesitant. Having placed the bite in her mouth, and thus gaining direct sensorial access to it, Carola no longer explicitly addresses the referent but rather incrementally completes the description by naming the side with her mouth full (*mit spinat hä*/"with spinach PRT", l. 22), publicly displaying her gustatory access *in fieri*. This occasions Ann's repair initiation (l. 24), so that the repair proper, reaffirming what the side dish is, is produced by Carola. Meanwhile, Ann takes another bite and looks at her plate, thereby possibly informing and shaping her current tasting experience.

So, this excerpt provides for various instances of "what is this?", revealing that a) the question is potentially relevant for any item comprising the plate; b) it can be answered by other-than-addressed participants, on the basis of visual access; c) responses based on visual access are not always the adequate ones; d) the question is not always answered or answerable by the person who is addressed and has direct primary sensorial (not only visual) access; and e) the description of the targeted referent remains uncertain even after a candidate has been offered. Thus, despite the importance of visual access to the dish, vision alone is not always sufficient for a response and can be possibly misleading.

While in the dark restaurant the absence of vision is formulated as "perverse" by one participant (Extract 3), in the gastronomic restaurant the availability of vision does not help to solve the puzzle. In both cases, the participants inhabit material environments that prompts them to orient to the availability of their differentiated sensorial accesses confronted with the specificity of the food preparations served—which is intersubjectively made accountable in audible ways in the former, in visible ways in the latter. In both cases, the description of the food items is uncertain, and even when it initially seems relatively settled, it can then be dismissed, rebutted, undermined—typically by using hedges (*irgend e sone sauce öppis*/"some sort of sauce something", Ex. 3, l. 274; *irgendwelchi muschle*/"some sort of clams", Ex. 4, l. 19; *oder sunst irgendöpis komischs*/"or something else strange", Ex. 4, l. 21). In what follows we zoom in on how patrons at the dark restaurant accomplish doing being puzzled over what they are eating through "what is this?" queries and variants thereof, and explore some of the ways in which co-participants subsequently respond (or not) to those distinct question-turn designs in differing sequential trajectories.

## 6. "What is this?" and its variants in the dark: multimodal designs and sequential contexts

The absence of light presents a playful challenge and practical puzzle for patrons to solve during their dining experience in the dark, and can foster a heightened sense of commensality. Without visual cues, sighted patrons often find themselves surprised by the taste and composition of the dishes, and engage in articulating for one another their gustatory perception to build consensus as to what it is they might be eating. This routinely gives rise to displays of uncertainty and puzzlement, typically expressed through questions like "what is this?". As we saw above, the question is produced even when some participant is able to unproblematically provide an answer, which shows its overall relevance. In the following sub-sections, we further explore what is done with "what is this?" and its variants, examining their turn design and how they are responded to (or not) within diverse sequential trajectories.

### 6.1. (Was) *isch das* + [candidate]? Responding with *ja*/response/*weiss nit*

As illustrated above, *was isch das?* constitutes a common way in which patrons (re)launch their project of identifying the food at hand. While participants can and often do produce unspecified, stand-alone *wh*-questions of this sort (see §5, above), they also regularly expand them with a candidate guess that invites confirmation in next turn.

We caught a glimpse of the context in which the question was asked in Extracts 1 and 2; we focus here on the format of the latter:

**Extract 5.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:06:15) (= part of Ex. 2)

5 TAT **was isch das?=tomate?**  
what is this tomato  
6 (1.3)  
7 SOL **ich glaubes.**  
I think so  
8 (0.2)  
9 JAY **mm:: (0.2) ja s'isch tomate ja.**  
yes it's tomato yes

Tatjana's *was isch das?*/"what is this" question is through-produced with the candidate *tomate?*/"tomato" as a single turn with a single intonational contour (l. 5). By producing this candidate answer question (Pomerantz, 1988), Tatjana offers a guess that shows herself to have a loose idea about what they might be eating, epistemically positioning her as somewhat knowing (vs. plain, stand-alone "what is this?" questions; cf. Harjunpää et al., 2023) and inviting (dis)confirmation in next turn. Whereas Solange merely affirms weakly with *ich glaubes*/"I think so" in next position (l. 7), Jay is more assertive (l. 9): he responds with a gustatory *mm::*, thereby publicly exhibiting his immediate sensorial access, and then goes on to confirm with *ja s'isch tomate ja*/"yes it's tomato yes". With this answer design ([turn-initial gustatory *mm::*] + [positive response particle] + [confirmatory repeat] + [reduplicated positive response particle]), Jay claims sensory-epistemic primacy and displays a strong degree of agency from responsive position.

While the candidate guess is post-positioned and through-produced with the plain "what is this?" question in the above case, it can also be constructed as a single polar question involving interrogative word order of the type [*isch das*/"is this"] + [candidate]. This occurs in the following excerpt:

**Extract 6.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/02:32:24)

1 (5.7)  
2 MIR **isch das wieder sellerie?**  
is this again celery  
3 (0.9)  
4 ALE hm?  
5 (0.9)  
6 ALE wo?  
where  
7 (1.7)  
8 ALE hm?  
9 (1.8)  
|mouth full-->  
10 MIR |h  
11 (0.4)  
12 MIR **weiss nit was das gsi isch.** ->|  
don't know what that was

After a silent moment in which she seems to be engaged with the food (although there are no audible sensorial engagements with it, at least on our microphones), Mireille proffers a candidate guess about an ingredient of her starter in the form of *isch das wieder sellerie?*/"is this again celery?" (l. 2). The turn is hearable as tying back to, and renewing



the relevance of, an earlier proposed candidate now tasted “again.” The candidate answer question is met with a series of repair initiators, relating to possible trouble in hearing (l. 4, 8) and locating the ingredient (l. 6), but ends up not receiving a substantial answer from Alex (see Ex. 12 below for an analysis of the continuation of this excerpt).

Extracts 5 and 6 showed participants to use question formats through which they indicate that they have a hunch, or candidate understanding, about what they are eating. This is, however minimally, a way in which questioners index a somewhat knowing stance, contrary to stand-alone “what is this?” questions through which they epistemically position themselves as having no clue about the dish. Falling somewhere in between such displays on the sensory-epistemic continuum, other types of *wh*-questions display some access to the food at hand in that they contain generic descriptive elements (cf. Harjunpää et al., 2023). For example, questioners may use sensorially available features, such as thermoreception, in their question design to identify some ingredient, as in the next fragment below.

**Extract 7.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/01:19:14)

```

1  MIR      |mouth full-->
2            |m↑m::
3            (0.5)
4  MIR      .tsk
5            (2.7)
6            -> |
7  MIR      was sin das für kalti teils? |
8            what kind of cold thingies are these
9            (0.8)
10 MIR      .mpt ((licks finger))
11 ALE      i ha's no nit ertaschtet.
12          I haven't yet palpated it

```

Mireille expresses gustatory pleasure from the food currently being eaten with a prosodically highlighted *m↑m::* (l. 1). The sensation receipt is followed by a lip smack (l. 3)—further displaying immediate tasting access—and, after some silence, she produces our target question *was sin das für kalti teils?* (literally “what are these for cold thingies?”, translatable as “what kind of cold thingies are these?” l. 5). While the question remains vague overall (note the use of the generalized referent *teils*/“thingies”), she characterizes an item on her plate as “cold,” thereby isolating a component based on temperature and making it a class of things constituting the dish. Following a finger-lick from Mireille (l. 7), Alex provides a non-answer response to the *wh*-interrogative: he produces an account in which he highlights his lack of sensorial access—tactile in this case—deemed necessary for an adequate answer (*i ha's no nit ertaschtet*/“I haven't yet palpated it” l. 8). This shows how patrons manifest an orientation to touch as a relevant sense to explore the textures of different dishes, in the absence of sight.

## 6.2. *Isch (e)s + [candidate]? As a challenge*

In the prior section, we saw that one common way of inquiring into the food in first/initiating position is through candidate answer questions. Questions exhibiting a very similar turn design—i.e., *isch (e)s*/“is it” + [candidate]?—can, however, also be deployed in second/responsive position, where they implement an initiation of repair. Such repair initiations can then become the “vehicle” (Schegloff, 2007) for another action: a *challenge*. Extracts 8 and 9 reveal how repair initiations of this type are used to challenge co-participants, displaying doubt about some prior food-related claim.

**Extract 8.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:31:48)

```

1  JAY      |mouth full-----|
2            |(aso) ich ha bis jetzt nur hädöpfel|stock
3            PRT I have so far only got mashed potatoes
4  TAT      ver[w(h)ü(h)tscht,]
5            [ HHH ] [hah .h .h
6  SOL      [isch's überhaupt hardöpfelstock?
7            is it really mashed potatoes
8            (0.2)
9  JAY      hhh d(h)efinitiv ja. .h
10           definitely yes

```

With some amusement, Jay reports that he has “so far only got mashed potatoes”, produced with interpolated laugh particles and his mouth full of food (l. 1–2). While Tatjana chuckles in response (l. 3), Solange challenges the report with *isch's überhaupt hardöpfelstock?*/“is it really mashed potatoes?” (l. 4; with stress on *i* in *isch's*). Jay then provides an agentive and upgraded confirming response (*d(h)efinitiv ja*/“definitely yes”; l. 6), expressing epistemic primacy and a strong degree of commitment to the “mashed potatoes” proposition.

A similar instance of *isch (e)s + [candidate]?* implementing a challenge can be seen below:

**Extract 9.** (BK\_Day1\_260918/00:26:46)

```

1  NAL      hey mari, (.) weisch du was es isch?
2            hey Mari do you know what it is
3            (0.2)
4  MAR      i glaub es isch chürbis.
5            I think it is pumpkin
6            ((38 lines omitted; patrons place their order for drinks))
7  JAN      mm:
8            (2.0)
9  NAL      isch es chürbis?
10           is it pumpkin
11           (0.2)
12 MAR      ni:t?
13           not
14           (0.4)
15           |mouth full-->
16 JAN      |i weiss ni.
17           I don't know

```

Nalani asks Mari *weisch du was es isch?*/“do you know what it is?”, using higher pitch at *isch* to display puzzlement (l. 1). In response, Mari offers a candidate that is qualified with “I think” (*i glaub es isch chürbis*/“I think it is pumpkin”; l. 3). Eventually, after the patrons have placed their order for drinks (not reproduced), Nalani challenges Mari's claim with the repair initiation *isch es chürbis?*/“is it pumpkin?” (l. 44; note the stress placed on *isch*, similarly to Solange in Ex. 8). Mari then responds with the questioning tag *ni:t?*/“not” (l. 46), proffering “pumpkin” for (dis)confirmation in next turn. The tag, however, is met with the non-answer response *i weiss ni*/“I don't know” from Jana, her mouth full of food (l. 48). She thereby claims no knowledge concerning the food being eaten, even when having immediate sensorial access.

## 6.3. “What is this?” initiating a public exploration of the dish and pursuing it unilaterally

The prior sections highlighted the routine use of *was isch das?* as a means to launch the project of identifying the dishes and their constituent ingredients. Participants were shown to put forward candidate propositions for their co-participants to affirm, confirm, reject, evaluate, build upon, and so on. We saw that in the participants' shared challenge of puzzling out the dish in the dark, food-related claims may become a locus of (playful) negotiation, contestation, and revision, illustrating that coming to an agreement about what it is they might be eating constitutes an in-situ collective achievement.

The data, however, contain occurrences within a different trajectory in which making sense and achieving recognition of the food currently being eaten is, in the absence of substantial contributions by co-



participants, *pursued unilaterally* rather than collaboratively within the dyad or triad. The next extract offers a case in point:

**Extract 10.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/02:33:33)

- 1 MIR was *isch das?*  
what is this  
(1.2)  
2 ALE *fen auto.f*  
a car  
(0.6)  
3 MIR *e rie:se stück irgendwas gmiesigs,*  
a huge piece of something veggie-like  
(0.5)  
4 MIR *>ah es isch wenigstens kei pilz.<*  
ah it is at least no mushroom  
(0.2)  
5 ALE *hhh*  
(0.6)  
6 MIR *|mouth full--|*  
7 MIR *|mm broccoli. (.) geil.*  
mm broccoli awesome

In a tone of puzzlement, Mireille wonders aloud *was isch das?* / “what is this?” (l. 1), instigating a public inquiry about the dish and soliciting assistance with exploring and identifying the food. Alex, however, proves of little help. After a 1.2-s silence (l. 2), he responds with *fen auto.f* / “a car” (l. 3). The turn is produced with audible smile voice (indicated in the transcript by the *f* signs), recognizable as non-serious, and thus as a jocular tease. Mireille does not join, or otherwise affiliate with, the non-serious stance in next position (e.g., there is no laughter particle). She continues to explore the dish on her own. She first loosely characterizes an ingredient as something reminiscent of vegetables with the hedged utterance at line 5 (*e rie:se stück irgendwas gmiesigs* / “a huge piece of something veggie-like”), and then marks a change in knowledge state (Heritage, 1984) with the negative formulation *> ah es isch wenigstens kei pilz. <* / “ah it is at least no mushroom” (l. 7; indicating her distaste for mushrooms, which was mentioned in prior talk but not reproduced here). Her description of the food currently being eaten ultimately eventuates in line 11, where she expresses enjoyment and displays identification of the vegetable by naming it, using a [gustatory *mm*] + [identifier] + [verbal assessment] format: *↑mm broccoli. (.) geil.* / “↑mm broccoli. (.) awesome.”

In this excerpt we can thus see how the participants do not *jointly* orient to the puzzle of what it is they might be eating. We observe a participant initiating a public and shared exploration of the dish. However, when met with an uncooperative response from the co-participant, they proceed unilaterally, adopting what might initially seem like a monological approach. A similar practice can be observed in Extract 11, where the same couple is eating an amuse-bouche.

**Extract 11.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:46:43)

- 1 MIR *was isch das?=ich kenn de gschmack.*  
what is this I know this taste  
(0.4)  
2 ALE *.tsk ich ebbä au.*  
me PRT too  
3 MIR *tomatepurée?*  
tomato purée  
4 ALE *.tsk (0.5) j:ä genau irgendwie sowas.*  
yeah exactly something like that  
(3.3)  
5 MIR *.mpt ((finger lick)) tomatesuppe. (0.2) kalti.*  
tomato soup cold

Mireille produces a “what is this?” question, rushing to claim some

familiarity with the taste of the food item (l. 1). Alex exhibits sensory access with a lip smack and reciprocates the sentiment, but does not further describe his sensorial experience (l. 3). Mireille then offers the candidate *tomatepurée?* / “tomato purée?” (l. 4) for confirmation in next turn. This is first met with a further lip smack by Alex, who then responds with a hedged agreement: *j:ä genau irgendwie sowas* / “yeah exactly something like that” (l. 5). Mireille, however, independently revises her hypothesis after a lapse (l. 6) from “tomato purée” to “tomato soup” (l. 7), which is preceded by a finger-licking smack, thus exhibiting immediate sensory access that grounds her candidate identification (Mondada, 2023b). The turn is more assertive, in that *tomatesuppe* is downwardly intoned (whereas the *tomatepurée?* candidate was produced with upward, try-marked intonation) and prosodically stressed, which also conveys a sense of discovery. Mireille then expands on the tomato soup assertion with the increment *kalti* / “cold”.

So, here we see a unilateral pursuit of a solution to the puzzle of identifying the dish. The same trajectory of a participant pursuing their own inquiry after an unhelpful, non-answer response by their co-participant is observable in the following two cases (continuations of Ex. 6 and 9). However, while in the prior examples the public inquiry into the dish is launched by a stand-alone “what is this?” question, the identification/recognition project begins differently in the cases shown below.

**Extract 12.** (BK\_Day3\_290918/02:32:47/216–231) (cont. Ex. 6)

- 1 (5.7)  
2 MIR *isch das wieder sellerie?*  
is this again celery  
(0.9)  
3 ALE *hm?*  
(0.9)  
4 ALE *wo?*  
where  
(1.7)  
5 ALE *hm?*  
(1.8)  
6 |mouth full-->  
7 MIR *|h*  
(0.4)  
8 MIR *weiss nit was das gsi isch.*  
don't know what that was  
(3.4)  
9 ALE *sellerie isch jo au nit unbedingt falsch.*  
celery is PRT not necessarily wrong either.  
(.)  
10 ALE *isch au [fein oder?*  
is also delicious right  
11 MIR *[nei isch nit sellerie gsi.*  
no it was not celery

Mireille’s question (l. 1) inquires into the dish using a [*isch das* / “is this?”] + [candidate] format. The candidate answer question receives no substantial uptake from Alex (l. 4–8). By producing the epistemic disclaimer “don’t know what that was” (l. 12), Mireille renews the relevance of a response to her initial question and invites help from Alex. Following a lengthy silence (l. 13), Alex merely aligns (l. 14) and moves to assessing the dish (l. 16). However, Mireille does not respond to the assessment. She rather remains focused on the identification problem, ultimately rejecting her initially proposed “celery” candidate with a negative answer (l. 17).

Likewise, in Ex. 13 Nalani relaunched the identification/recognition project by challenging (l. 1) a prior food-related claim by Mari (not shown).

**Extract 13.** (BK\_Day1\_260918/00:26:46/439–447) (cont. Ex. 9)

44 NAL isch es chürbis?  
 is it pumpkin  
 45 (0.2)  
 46 MAR ni:t?  
 not  
 47 (0.4)  
 |mouth full-->  
 48 JAN |i weiss ni.  
 I don't know  
 49 (1.3)  
 ->  
 50 JAN aso| sisch fein.  
 PRT it's delicious  
 51 (0.2)  
 52 NAL es- es chunnt mir mega bekannt vor aber- (.) irgendwie  
 it it's very familiar to me but somehow  
 53 ischs au (1.5) rüebli? (.) nei nit- rüebli ischs nit.  
 it's also carrots no not carrots it's not

In response to Nalani's challenge (*isch es chürbis?*/"is it pumpkin?"), there is a hesitant rejoinder by Mari (l. 46) and a no-knowledge claim by Jana (l. 48), neither of which significantly advances the effort to identify the dish. Just like in Extract 12 above, a co-participant (here, Jana) delivers a positive assessment of the food (l. 50)—as an alternative thing to say when uncertain about its identity. Faced with these somewhat unhelpful responses, Nalani, who initially relaunched the shared exploration of the dish, then takes it upon herself to individually reconsider the "pumpkin" hypothesis (l. 52–53).

For a final instance, we join Jay, Tatjana, and Solange as they are trying to discern the ingredients of their appetizer.

#### Extract 14. (BK\_Day3\_290918/00:08:47)

1 JAY ze- mozzarella hets ↑au no dinn gell?  
 ze- mozzarella is also in there right  
 2 (0.4)  
 3 TAT h ich weiss nit was das isch.  
 h I don't know what that is  
 4 SOL |ich weiss nit was es isch.  
 I don't know what it is  
 5 JAY |ich glaub  
 I think  
 6 die chügeli sin mozzarella.  
 these balls.DIM are mozzarella

Jay's question (l. 1) inquires into the dish using a [statement] + [tag] format (*ze-mozzarella hets ↑au no dinn gell?*/"ze-mozzarella is also in there right"), exerting pressure for a yes-type answer. Note, however, that the claim is qualified somewhat through prosodic marking (stress and higher pitch at ↑au), displaying some degree of puzzlement. In response, both Tatjana and Solange claim not to know what "that" (l. 3) or "it" (l. 4) is. Ultimately, Jay sticks to his initial guess of *mozzarella*, highlighting shape as a sensorially available giveaway (*ich glaub die chügeli sin mozzarella*/"I think these balls.DIM are mozzarella"; l. 5–6).

These instances highlight the persistence of the identification project, even in the absence of active contribution from the co-participant (s). It is worth noting that what at first sight might appear as instances of self-talk is in fact an interactional achievement. When the co-participant fails to provide a substantial, informative response, it is the questioner who, in a somewhat monological fashion, continues to pursue their initial inquiry, thereby giving the interaction a self-talk quality in retrospect. This illustrates a fundamental aspect of eating in the dark, encouraging a multisensorial exploration of the food, seen as a puzzle to be solved, often collaboratively but sometimes individually as well. In the latter case, the inquiry remains collective, since it can be overheard by others, working as a possible instruction for them.

## 7. Conclusion

The puzzlement stirred by creative cuisine as well as dining in the dark produces a collective focus on the food and a joint sensorial exploration of the dishes. Patrons do not merely consume the dishes presented to them; they actively engage in tasting them. This study

examined just how ordinary participants engage in, and interactionally coordinate, their public inquiry into unknown food. Within this local inquiry, "what is this?" was shown to be a recurrent practice, serving as a means to direct attention to the dish/food item in question (with the deictic expression "this") and drawing on the ongoing multisensorial access to it. The question initiates a tasting project during which participants verbally articulate sensorial features in a public and intersubjective manner. As shown by Extract 4.1 (ll. 5–6), the question can be raised by any participant at any time, even before other (similar) sequences are brought to completion, thus highlighting a sense of urgency generated by the sensorial encounter with unfamiliar food. This is observable both in upscale gastronomic dinners and dinners in the dark. However, while the former experience is based on a synaesthetic appraisal guided by vision (even when vision fails to help to find a solution), the latter is characterized by explorations in the absence of sight—a circumstance formulated and assessed as "perverse" by one participant (Ex. 3, l. 15). In both cases, the question reveals contexts in which ordinary synaesthetic associations do not work anymore, and in which alternative sensorial and interactional practices are mobilized to address this "breaching" situation (Garfinkel, 2002).

Variations in the format of the question reveal different sensory-epistemic stances of the sequence initiator as well as the respondent (s). A stand-alone "what is this?" shows the speaker to have no idea about what they are eating. By contrast, a candidate question design (*was isch das?* = *X?*, Ex. 5–7, §6.1) displays that they have a hunch, or candidate understanding, about what they are eating. The question might also perform a challenge to some ongoing identification (Ex. 8–9, §6.2). The question might share uncertainty but demonstrates the active involvement of the questioner in the search, which can be pursued unilaterally by the questioner (Ex. 10–14, §6.3). This may result in a series of unilateral guesses, which despite a self-talk character, always address co-present others, invite them to join the search, and might work as instructions for currently silent others.

The responses to the question are notably diverse and extend beyond mere lexical descriptors—contrary to other contexts in which the question has been documented, such as in experimental set-ups designed to elicit specific vocabulary or in other social activities where standard or expert descriptors are produced. Responses are characterized by fragmentary hesitant talk, accompanied by hedges and approximations. While some lexical items manifest some knowledge (as seen in more confident guesses), others consist of vague and incomplete references that manifest uncertainty, claiming and displaying not-knowing. Responses are also generally packaged as a multimodal multisensorial Gestalt that exhibits direct sensorial access to the food. These sensorial practices are actively made publicly witnessable, audible, by the participants, typically prefaced by tasting sounds like *.tsk* or *mms* that can permeate the ongoing turn (such as when audibly produced with one's mouth full). These sound resources exhibit a sensorial engagement with the food and legitimize the description in response to "what is this?". They also manifest an endogenous orientation of the participants to the public accountability of what they are currently doing, in the absence of any visual and visible display. They constitute a challenging and inspiring phenomenon for EMCA researchers too: They offer an opportunity to investigate embodied actions even in the absence of video documentation, focusing on what participants themselves make relevant, that is, (over)hearable sound manifestations of body movements in the dark. This opens up new ways of thinking about the complex relations between multimodality and multisensoriality, and calls for further research into environments where sensorial access to food is restricted, impeded, or potentially misleading, and the ways this shapes tasting experiences and commensality. Beyond the limited data sets this paper is based on, a diversification of settings and activities, as well as types of participants, would enable to better pinpoint the articulation between local ecologies, materiality, sensoriality and knowledge. Further reflections about how to specifically document the restricted sensorial access of the participants would also enhance the

methodological and analytical approach based on video recordings.

Both dining in the dark and dining in creative gastronomic restaurants offer patrons an opportunity to collectively rediscover food, while for us analysts, it opens a window to investigate ordinary sensorial expectations, their moments of crisis, and the practices deployed to re-establish their sensorial intelligibility *here and now*.

## Transcription conventions

The transcripts adopt Jefferson's (2004) conventions for talk and Mondada's (2018) conventions for embodiment.

## Ethical statement

### Exploring food without seeing: multisensorial practices in a dark restaurant

have been gathered and transcribed by us, following the ethical standards of our discipline (interactional linguistics) and of our country (Switzerland). In particular, the latter do not necessitate the approval of any ethical committee. All data have been recorded with the informed consent of the participants, making clear the conditions at which the data will be published:

- the consent given by the participants accepts that the transcripts can be published, including video screen shots; this moreover concerns anonymized textual transcripts and non-anonymized visual images.
- The consent is not given for the video recordings to be openly published, for reasons of confidentiality. That's why the video recordings are not publicly accessible.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Philipp Hänggi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lorenza Mondada:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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