NOV. 26 2014 7:21 AM

Polarizing Foods

Why do people love or loathe certain tastes?

By Rachel Pomerance Berl

Illustration by Ellie Skrzat

No matter how you slice it, the wiggly cylinder of cranberry sauce à la can tends to get a reaction on Thanksgiving. For some, this ridged wonder summons nostalgia for Thanksgivings past or glee for its Jell-O-like slurpability. Others can't get past the jiggle or the idea that this is even food.

As they say, there's no accounting for taste.

Or is there?

You might not get worked up about cranberry sauce, but chances are you or someone at your table feels strongly about other foods, some of which may well be on your Thanksgiving menu. Take, for example, stuffing. A stew of goopy breadcrumbs may send your soul soaring or seem like a lukewarm, mushy mess. And if (like me) you consider sweet potato soufflé something close to heaven, you'd be surprised how many pass up the dish defiantly—condemning it as a "baby food" they'd reject even if they didn't have their teeth. This Thanksgiving, my husband and a friend will face off over the privilege of eating the turkey neck. I, on the other hand, will probably leave the room rather than get queasy at the spectacle of either of them gorging on a turkey neck. And this is precisely the point: Whether you swear by turkey or Tofurky at Thanksgiving (or pine for pineapple on your pizza), it's a safe bet that someone out there boasts an equal and opposite reaction to your particular food passion.

At a café recently, I noticed the server offer up a pickle with each sandwich order. And each time, the customer gushed, "Yes, please!" After several such exchanges, I commented that everyone really seems to wants the pickle. "Oh no," the server countered. "They either *really* want one, or they *really* don't."

This doesn't happen with all foods or all people, of course. So what is it about these particular foods—the Brussels sprouts and black olives of the world—that seem to incite such delight and disgust?

I posed the question to Paul Rozin, a University of Pennsylvania professor of psychology and expert in food aversions, who said he knew of no data on whether and why certain foods provoke extreme reactions. Curious about my question, he re-examined some of his previous research on food preferences among a population of Penn students and their parents and grandparents. The results, which he plans to publish, showed that certain foods were indeed polarizing among certain generations. Lima beans, chicken liver, and beefsteak, for example, elicited strong reactions in either direction from the parents and grandparents. All three groups were also "bimodal," as he puts it, on black olives. The grandparents felt passion for or against hot sauce.

Rozin's research aside, one food seems particularly, possibly uniquely, good at working people into a lather: cilantro. **Studies** have shown a possible genetic basis for the fact that some people think it tastes like soap and others find it fabulous. But even so, research suggests it's possible for cilantro haters to learn to enjoy it.

Many of the foods that affect us most strongly have extreme or unusual qualities. The bloody color of beets or slimy feel of okra can evoke extreme reactions, says eating behavior expert Brian Wansink, who directs the Cornell Food and Brand Lab. The weirdness of the food stigmatizes it and justifies avoidance, he explains. Plus, we tend to be food neophobic. "We're naturally a little bit untrustful of really new foods," Wansink says. "If we just went and ate everything we saw, we'd be dead."

Repeated exposure, however, neutralizes the newness, making the exotic safe, familiar, even crave worthy—the so-called "acquired taste." "No American likes kimchi the first time they eat it," says Wansink, a kimchi convert. But exposure doesn't always beget affection. Wansink's wife, who is Taiwanese, and their daughters love aged eggs, which are big in China, he says. Still, he finds aged eggs "very, very gross."

The fact that one culture's comfort food is another's *Fear Factor* illustrates the influence of exposure. “Most of what guides our food behavior is past experience," says taste researcher Linda Bartoshuk of the University of Florida. “It’s learned.” We all start out with a love of sweet foods and an aversion to bitter ones, she says. But conditioning takes over even before birth—**research** shows that food preferences can transfer from mother to child depending on what she eats during pregnancy.

Bartoshuk’s lab discovered that some people experience taste more intensely than others—partly due to possessing more taste buds. These so-called supertasters, who make up some 15 percent of Americans, may find fatty, spicy, or bitter foods unbearable. At the same time, they can experience more pleasure from food than others. But even here, Bartoshuk stresses that such sensations don’t predict loving or loathing a specific food. Supertaster or not, our experience influences our tastes.

Odor also plays a critical role in the taste experience. And here, too, it’s subjective. Not everyone can pick up particular odors, and you may be grateful for that. The smell of skunk, for example, is not universally offensive, Bartoshuk says. Add experience to the mix, and you can see why stinky cheese may remind one person of a romantic trip to Paris and another of B.O. In any case, food aversions often follow bad experiences, as anyone who took a wild ride on tequila can tell you.

The fact that food can viscerally conjure up memories is known as the Proust effect, named for the author’s description of being **transported by the taste** of madeleine cookies. A more recent example was captured in the Pixar movie ***Ratatouille***, when a bite of the French vegetable dish sends hard-edged food critic Anton Ego into the sunlit country kitchen of his youth, gulping down emotion with each morsel of the dish.

Such powerful associations explain why foods can become loaded with meaning and linked to identity. In some cases, they become “symbols of ethnic membership,” says Daniel Kelly, a philosopher at Purdue and author of ***Yuck! The Nature and Moral***

Significance of Disgust. One example of food as a litmus test for belonging: vegemite, the tar-toned Australian food paste that resists easy description and, for many, consumption. "It's part of being an Australian that you like vegemite, but the rest of the world hates it," Kelly says.

Top Comment

"No American likes kimchi the first time they eat it," says Wansink . . Nonsense. More...

-janeslogin

---

58 Comments **Join In**

For Kelly, growing up in the rural Midwest came with certain food sensibilities worn like a badge of honor. "We don't eat Thai food. We don't eat raw fish ... Deep fried Twinkies, that's what we're about," he said. *BuzzFeed* recently riffed on Jewish food with a **video** of non-Jews trying out such idiosyncratic items as gefilte fish: On the jarred mishmash of gelatinous white fish, one reviewer reported that it "tastes like a grocery store smells." Another realized, after her initial reaction of horror, that she didn't mind it after all.

Strong reactions to what we eat may reveal something about the food itself. But they say plenty more about the person reacting. So this Thanksgiving, whether you crave the turkey neck or can't stand the canned cranberry sauce, you can thank your upbringing, your ancestors, your decades of inculcated Thanksgiving traditions, your number of taste buds and smelling aptitude, and, yes, your mother.

Progressive

Here’s Why Guys Are Obsessed With This Underwear…

The Weekly Brief | Mack Weldon

Sponsored Links

Test a Standing Desk solution for 30 Days

VARIDESK

A Toy Shredder Tried Super Chewer BarkBox: Here's What Happened

Shared.com for Super Chewer BarkBox

Patrick Swayze's Son Is A Spitting Image Of Him

Refinance Gold

Sponsored Links

Antonio Banderas Daughter Is All Grown Up And Looks Just Like Tippi Hedren, Her Famous Grandmother

InvestmentGuru

How To Easily Kill 98% Of All Mold In Your Home

NatureFresh Air Purifier

Sponsored Links

We Tried HelloFresh: Here's What Happened

Popdust for HelloFresh

[Gallery] Tom Selleck Makes Brave Statement About His Personal Life

Worldemand

Two Banks That Pay 10 Times The Interest On Your Savings

MyFinance Bank Referrals

Sponsored Links

Top U.S. Vet Reveals: The Worst Dog Food You Can Buy

Dr. Marty

We Tried The IG Grandma Facemask And The Hype Is Real

Marie Claire | Hanacure

Sponsored Links

Beverly Hills Surgeon: How To Get Rid of Deep Wrinkles Without Surgery

Recommended For You

Help! My Dorm Mate Diddles Herself While I'm in the Room.

Help! My Maid of Honor Speech Ruined Her Wedding and Might End Our Friendship.