

Another interpretation is that we have such weak teeth that we are forced to 'tenderise' the meat by cooking it. But this does not explain why we should want to eat it while it is still hot, or why we should heat up many kinds of food that do not require 'tenderising'. The third explanation is that, by increasing the temperature of the food, we improve its flavour. By adding a complicated range of tasty subsidiaries to the main food objects, we can take this process still further. This relates back, not to our adopted carnivory, but to our more ancient primate past. The foods of typical primates have a much wider variety of flavours than those of carnivores. When a carnivore has gone through its complex sequence of hunting, killing and preparing its food, it behaves much more simply and crudely at the actual crunch. It gobbles; it bolts its food down. Monkeys and apes, on the other hand, are extremely sensitive to the subtleties of varying tastiness in their food morsels. They relish them and keep on moving from one flavour to another. Perhaps, when we heat and spice our meals, we are harking back to this earlier primate fastidiousness. Perhaps this is one way in which we resisted the move towards full-blooded carnivory.

Having raised the question of flavour, there is a misunderstanding that should be cleared up concerning the way we receive these signals. How do we taste what we taste? The surface of the tongue is not smooth, but covered with small projections, called papillae, which carry the taste buds. We each possess approximately 10,000 of these taste buds, but in old age they deteriorate and decrease in number, hence the jaded palate of the elderly gastronome. Surprisingly, we can only respond to four basic tastes. They are: sour, salt, bitter and sweet. When a piece of food is placed on the tongue, we register the proportions of these four properties contained in it, and this blending gives the food its basic flavour. Different areas of the tongue react more strongly to one or other of the four tastes. The tip of the tongue is particularly responsive to salt and sweet, the sides of the tongue to sour and the back of the tongue to bitter. The tongue as a whole can also judge the texture and 169