Eating with the Dead

Ritual, Memory and a Gustemological Approach to Taste

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Abstract *This contribution argues for a culturally embedded approach to food, memory, and sensory experience. While 'taste' is often treated as something that can be abstracted from context and studied in various laboratory or 'real-world' laboratory situations, I argue for the ways that the experience of taste is deeply shaped by cultural experience, for which I suggest the term "gustemology" as an appropriate term. In my analysis of Greek food, memory, and sensory experience, I focused on the role of food in ritual and exchange practices as one way of understanding these cultural contexts that matter. As a key example I present research on the Greek funeral food, kollivo, which is deeply tied with ideas about memory and the ongoing relations with the dead. It is these non-abstractable social relations that are key in understanding the experience of the taste of food and its memory in ritual, as well as everyday interactions.*

When I first became interested in the topic of food, memory, and the senses, it was in the late 1990s, as an outgrowth of my research on the island of Kalymnos in the Greek Dodecanese. "Eat, to remember Kalymnos," was a phrase I often heard during the course of a year and a half that I lived there with my family in the course of my study of Kalymnian lifeways and historical consciousness. The phrase itself was almost always accompanied by the offer of food, from the typical grilled fish and octopus – staples on most of the Greek islands, to more unusual, to me, island offerings from crisp medlars and juicy tangerines to all varieties of wild greens, snails, and other local delicacies. By the 1990s there were growing scholarly fields of "food studies," "the anthropology of the senses," and "memory studies". But the connection between these topics remained in the realm of anecdote.

Twenty years later, scholarly work on food, memory and the senses has blossomed in multiple directions, as attested by review articles, monographs and articles in mainstream journals. Yet google 'food, memory and the senses' and the most popular hits are still suggestions for foods that boost memory powers and references to works in psychology claiming to show that our "evolved psychology" explains the connection between food and memory ("it's in the hippocampus;" "we naturally de-

sire sweet flavors")[1]; and a cognitive "neurogastronomy" to manipulate our senses by changing the shape of plates or the color of forks.[2] Whatever the value of such understandings, they tend to ignore what to me is key in understanding the relationship of food, memory and sensory experience: the centrality of context. Anita von Poser, in her ethnography of foodways of the Bosum of Papua New Guinea, notes of their staple sago pudding that regardless of whether it appeared to her to have the right consistency or preparation, Bosum insisted that a sociable person cannot fail to produce tasty sago pudding (Von Poser 2013: 118). By contrast, the tendency of neurogastronomy and other hard science approaches to taste, to try and isolate taste in the laboratory to get at its objective/inherent/sui generis properties (Shepherd 2013), is basically misguided in my view, no one, or perhaps very few people eat, by choice, in a laboratory. And not just the individual and social contexts, stressed for example in Charles Spence's (2017) work in which food on an airplane tastes different than food at your neighborhood pub because these are multi-sensory experiences that mediate our tastes. These insights may well be true. But for the anthropologist, it is wider cultural contexts[3] that need to be brought into the frame of analysis. This diversity suggests a different type of explanation than any provided by evolved psychology. How we taste, and how we remember taste, can only be adequately explored within such cultural preferences and practices. Elizabeth and Paul Rozin (1981) famously describe the "flavor principles" of different world areas that allow one to distinguish taste preferences and spice combinations. But even here, there is something missing in an approach that subsumes Greece to Mediterranean cuisine, and ignores key difference, for example, between the use of basil for cooking in Italy, and the very different relationship to basil in Greece (discussed below). A culturally informed approach to taste, in fact, a gustemological approach that sees taste as part of a broader world view, might offer some answers.

Another way to think about these issues I am raising is in terms of Latour's concept of mediation. When I write of taste being embedded in culture and social relations, I recognize that these include people, matter and techniques. As Latour notes in discussing the concept of mediation: "The mediation, the technical translation, that I am trying to understand resides in the blind spot where society and matter exchange properties." (Latour 1994: 41) In my analysis of Greek food, memory, and sensory experience, I focused on the role of food in ritual and exchange practices as

1 https://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2012/05/food-and-memory-john-allen.html

2 Yogurt, it is claimed, tastes sweeter on a white spoon than a black one (see https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/apr/28/five-tricks-of-the-senses).

3 The concept of social or cultural context is not unproblematic, and scholars are increasingly aware of how contexts are created (in analysis and in people's own claims to relevance), and not simply *there* to be found. See e.g., the discussion of context in Dilley (1998), as well as some of the critiques of context from Actor-Network Theory (Asdal 2012).

one way of understanding the ways that some, though not all of the characteristics of *remembrance are tasted and consumed*. In focusing on food's mediating role in the rituals I describe, I am arguing, in other words, that these cultural contexts make a difference. I suggest that certain foods and their tastes are context-bound, and further are deeply shaped – though often in different ways – by their symbolic associations with death.

For example, Greek memorial services for the dead (mnimosina) would be incomplete without the funeral food, kollivo (pl. kolliva), made from boiled winter wheat berries mixed with a variety of other ingredients, which often include pomegranate seeds, sesame seeds, a variety of nuts, dried currants and raisins, spices such as cinnamon, cloves and allspice, parsley, and breadcrumbs. The recipe can take several days to prepare because the wheat berries need to be soaked overnight, then boiled and rinsed, and then dried overnight (See Sutton 2003). Once mixed with other ingredients, it is ideally left in the refrigerator for another night for the flavors to meld, before being spread out on a plate and covered with powdered sugar and various decorations (Jordan almonds, more nuts, dragees) which are typically formed into the shape of a cross, but also may include flower and other shapes. The female head of household who has typically prepared the kollivo will then take it to the local church for blessing. It is served at the multiple memorial ceremonies that are held for the dead three, nine and 40 days after death, and three, six and nine months and then every year on the anniversary of the person's death.

This is a food that is used, then, to remember the dead, and in eating it, you offer prayers for the forgiveness of the dead person or the "lightening" of the dead person's soul. It is also meant to be offered *on behalf of the dead person* (or "in the name of the dead person" – sto onoma tou pethamenou), to extend their acts of food generosity and thus to continue to build their generous reputation for giving food to neighbors and to strangers – as well as their memory more broadly – even after death.[4] Contributing a pomegranate to a neighbor who will use it to make kollivo can be seen reciprocally as a blessing for the dead person (Panourgia 1995: 136). Serving kollivo to others, then, is a way of balancing accounts so that one's sins in life are forgiven, which makes the symbolism of kollivo even more striking. On the one hand, kollivo clearly partakes of the Christian symbolism of rebirth, as the ingredients, being seeds, will, in the process of rotting, give forth new life. Panourgia notes the symbolism of each ingredient of the kollivo preparation. The almonds "symbolize the bones freed of their flesh; the parsley (in lieu of ancient celery?) symbolizes the grass, the coolness of the point of arrival of the dead; the raisins testify to the fact that after the death and Resurrection of Christ death is bitter no longer" (Panourgia 1995: 131). But kollivo also partakes of more ancient symbolism, both with ingredients such as

4 For a full discussion of the relationship of memory and food generosity, see Sutton 2001: chapter 3.

pomegranates being associated with the underworld in Greek mythology, as well as the association of the word itself with ancient coins, thus suggesting again a balancing of accounts. On Kalymnos the expression "paying your debts with the koliva of others" suggests an attempt to cheat the work of generosity that goes into building a valued reputation. In times of political oppression, serving kollivo in public to memorialize the victims of government violence can also constitute an act of indirect resistance (Panourgia 1995: 137).

Fig. 1: Two plates of kollivo at the memorial service for Katina Miha, 2021. As is typical, a photo of the deceased is placed behind the kollivo, suggesting that they are offering it to the guests (the smaller photo to the right is of her mother).

Source: Katerina Miha. Reproduced with permission.

However, some people reject kollivo, or refuse to eat it under certain circumstances because of its association with death. This takes a number of forms. In times prior to refrigeration, kollivo could be dangerous because of the long processing time associated with making it. If it should spoil, people were known to have gotten sick or even died from eating kollivo. So, it was important to have trust in the kollivo maker to have properly prepared it. A morning television show in Greece in 2022 called Society Hour (*Koinonia Wra*) on the Mega channel included an interesting

scene featuring kollivo.[5] The hosts were interviewing the head of the Union of Hospital Doctors of Athens and Piraeus, Matani Pagoni, about COVID-19 restrictions. However, before starting the interview one of the hosts offered Pagoni a bag of kollivo, saying that one of the TV crew had brought it in. Pagoni immediately responds by asking why she is being offered kollivo early in the morning. The other host responds "Isn't kollivo a superfood?" When the hosts insist, Pagoni asks "are these side effects of COVID? (i.e., these strange actions). Did I come to a funeral?" The hosts still insist that it is "great food" with pomegranate in it, and she responds once again: "Eat it yourself. I'm a superstitious person." When I asked Greek friends about this, they had different reactions. My colleague Nafsika Papaharalambou noted her reaction: "It kind of feels like a provocation to me. Conscious or unconscious. As if she were to be blamed for the death of all these people, or somehow to accept the kolliva and the responsibility of those deaths. I think the image of a doctor in the midst of a pandemic eating kolliva would be a very powerful one." She notes, by contrast, that her father said that kollivo is a food that "warms you up" which is why they were eating it for breakfast [in the middle of winter]. Many noted that what was inappropriate was to treat kollivo like any ordinary food (or even a superfood) that should be judged by taste (the fact that it had pomegranate in it, which many people prefer), or nutrition. It was *out of context*. Further, as Papaharalambou noted to me, they were making her responsible for remembering the death of a stranger. But other interpretations are possible. People told me stories about superstition about kollivo, that it was a dangerous food (not just because of the danger of poisoning noted above), because it brought one close to death. One woman compared it to people closing their windows when a funeral was passing their house – so that death wouldn't slip in. One man told me about taking some kollivo that he had received at a memorial ceremony with him on a hunting trip with his brother on a nearby, uninhabited island. When he brought out the kollivo to enjoy with the rabbit that they had caught, his brother went and hid in the boat and wouldn't come out until he had disposed of it. In this context, the actions of Pagoni, ironically perhaps because she was responsible for COVID-19 policy at the time, could be taken as a display of traditional superstition in the context of a national television program, and many people expressed variations of this view to me.

In eating kollivo, then, Greeks may activate many different contexts that surround it as a meaningful sensory practice. They may focus on the ingredients, in some parts of Greece it can include parsley or very occasionally, basil (but see below), but on Kalymnos most people prefer it without these ingredients. They may focus on the decoration of the kollivo described above, which some women gain a reputation in the community for being particularly skilled at. In the context of contempo-

5 It can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2po6Bft7VZM&list=PL3GSIeV8qPMDn7XHoEP33K4vEBWw6mI2J&index=13

rary times, they may, like the hosts of the morning show, suggest that its ingredients (wheat berries, nuts, and pomegranate) qualify it as a "superfood." But they may also refuse to separate it from its primary context and function: to literally remember the dead, and thus see it as polluting in non-ritual contexts.

Memory also plays a key role here in eating kollivo, as it does for all food in Greece, a theme I have developed elsewhere (Sutton 2001; 2011). Eating kollivo may call to mind previous occasions of its consumption – that is, previous memorial ceremonies and the people being memorialized in whose memory the kollivo is consumed.[6] It makes particularly explicit the connection of food and memory that has led me to suggest a more general theory of food memory might begin to be developed: one which focuses on how familiarity and novelty combine in each act of eating. Elsewhere (Sutton 2011) I argue that food is not simply a memory jog, in the Proustian sense, but memory itself could be thought of as a sensory capacity. Not, that is, if we think of senses as passive recorders of experience. Rather if we understand them, following Howes, as conduits between inner and outer worlds. This allows us to move beyond the Western "five sense" model and broaden our understanding of the capacities that shape our perception. Memory shapes perception as each act of tasting is both an immediate experience, and one that calls upon previous tastings to place a flavor, to compare and contrast, to evoke familiarity, comfort or disgust. On Kalymnos, because people often cooked and ate a known range of dishes familiar to the entire community, small variations such as the kind of water used to soak beans, the kind of salt used to flavor octopus stew, or other "minor" variations on each meal were topics that provoked extensive discourse at mealtimes, when people would taste the meal, share their sense impressions, and discuss what was similar and different from previous iterations (see Sutton 2001: chapter 4). This is true even for dishes that are strongly associated with ritual or tradition, as we have seen with kollivo. Similarly, with stuffed grape leaves, considered the favorite dish on Kalymnos and ideal for the Sunday meal. Each dish of stuffed grape leaves (filla) did not stand on its own, nor did it pass unremarked in its familiarity. Rather, memories of past filla were a constant presence whenever that dish was consumed (Sutton 2001: chapter 4). Any innovation, such as stirring bechamel into moussaka, rather than having it as a layer on top, would stick or be discarded based on a long knowledge/memory of previous iterations of the same dish (see Sutton 2021 for further discussion). Here, Maurice Halbwachs' classic work (1992) on the material and social milieu that makes memory possible is particularly relevant. It is the fact that each dish and each taste is not *only* a sensory experience but is embedded in practices which are recognizable to an entire community – as everyone in Kalymnos attends the memorial kolliva ceremonies – that makes for

6 This raises the issue of memory as an active process that mediates present perception, or in other words, memory *as a sense*. For more on this, see Sutton 2011.

such a powerful connection between food and memory. It is because cooking practices, and taste standards, are part of a shared social/sensory life in the community of Kalymnos that they can serve as anchors for what I would call a "gustemology" or a food-centered worldview.[7] What that might mean for studying memory in more individualistic, fragmented or diverse social settings is a question for future ethnography, though work on food memory among migrant communities (see e.g. Law 2001; Manalansan 2001; Vallianatos/Raine 2008) suggests the importance, in many cases, to be able to reconstruct a familiar world of food and tastes amidst the displacement of migration and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, for Greek migrants in the U.S., the U.K. and elsewhere, food is often a powerful solace to the pain of living abroad (a concept elaborated in the Greek term "xenetia"). Greeks often send packages through the mail to relatives as a way of reminding them of food from home and reaffirming their ties to a familiar sensory experience in the midst of an alien, and often alienating, sensory environment (Sutton 2001: chapter 3), another example of material objects and practices which mediate social and spatial relationships as well as memory processes.

One interesting detail that I believe has wider implications for our understanding of the role of context: Greek stores in the U.S. such as the well-known *Titan* grocery store in Queens, New York, carry not only typical Greek ingredients, but mass-produced, commodified Greek products such as candy and even bottled water. The 'taste of home' extends for migrants to these commodified products, and not just the localized cooking of families and small communities. Having the familiar, recognizable packaging of a water bottle or other products is, then, part of producing the sense of familiarity that immigrants are reproducing in these new circumstances. The implications of this relate to the question of whether the contextualized tastes I'm describing only apply to small 'traditional' communities with robust food cultures, no longer relevant to the globalized contemporary world of more fragmented communities? While I suggest above that this is an ethnographic question, I would still like to argue that contextual eating in familiar communities is potentially part of all human experience.

Sidney Mintz has famously drawn a distinction between societies that have a "cuisine" (what I would call a "robust food culture") and those that do not. As he put it: "I find it difficult to understand how a people can have a cuisine without ongoing, active producing of food and producing of opinions about food, around which and through which people communicate daily to each other who they are." (1996: 98) With this definition in mind, however, we can see that people generate opinions and memories of particular foods, even if commodified and mass-produced, and even if

7 Gustemology is a play on terms used by anthropologists like "acoustemology," to suggest cultural focus on different sensory ratios (see Sutton 2011; On acoustemology Feld 2003; on sensory rations Howes 2005).

living in fragmented societies (within which they may form smaller communities). So, for example, one might suggest how candy bought at candy stores, or mass-produced cereal, would form a source of this kind of embedded taste knowledge that I have been discussing for particular generations of kids sharing a certain experience even in the most modern, 'globalized' societies.[8] Indeed, this also suggests that just because foods are mass produced to sell to as wide a consumer base as possible, this does not mean that consumers don't add all kinds of specific meanings to make these foods meaningful in particular cultural contexts.[9] While I would not suggest that there is no difference between the mediating role of food in a place like Kalymnos and a place like London, I would argue that close ethnographic comparisons are needed to get at the actual differences that matter to people's experience of contextual and decontextualized taste.

One last example taken from my ongoing research once again emphasizes the importance of recognizing the embeddedness of taste in specific cultural contexts. Greeks love the smell of basil. It is grown in pots on windowsills throughout Greece, and Greek migrants often see the smell of basil as representing home to them. As one Greek folklorist famously wrote: "A flowerpot of basil can represent the soul of a people better than a drama of Aeschylus." (Dragoumis 1976) Basil features in offices, with large growths used to wipe one's hands before shaking the hands of an acquaintance, or sometimes the whole pot is shaken as a way to deodorize the office space. But basil is most importantly used in church – priests dip basil fronds in holy water and stroke it onto people's heads as a way of blessing them. As they do on the students the first day of school. Some people use basil to prepare the body for a funeral ceremony, making a frond of basil and putting it in the hands of the dead person to be displayed as they await burial. And the yeast mixture used to prepare bread for blessing in the church is often scented with water that has had basil dipped in it. This association of basil with the range of everyday and more ritualized experiences is tied to its holy status: basil was found at the tomb of Christ by Saint Helen (mother of Constantine the Great) and taken as a sign of the resurrection (whether this tradition is tied to the association of basil with holiness in India is a matter for future research). In all of these ways, basil is so deeply imbricated into the lives *and ideas about death* of Greeks that it seems inappropriate – even if not explicitly forbidden by the church, to eat basil. As one woman put it to me: "I don't like the taste of that smell." To analyze this statement as descriptive of a purely cognitive taste experience, rather than a total socio-sensory perception, is to miss the most important aspects of it. Basil is, once again, in Latourian terms, a material substance that mediates the experience of Greekness, even if it does so by smell rather than taste.

8 On candy as a source of sensory and embodied memories, see my discussion in Sutton 2008.

9 See Howes (ed.) 1996, as well as any of the voluminous work on consumption by Daniel Miller.

Fig. 2: Gravesite of Katina Miha (and other family members). A pot of basil is placed in the back left corner (near the photo of the deceased), once again emphasizing the association of basil with the care of the dead.

Source: David Sutton.

It is the embeddedness of food in exchange, ritual and everyday life, and the sensory attention given to food in Greek culture, which makes it a particularly useful exemplar. Not that Greeks are unique in this regard, and hopefully the readers of this chapter will find resonances in the cultural practices that they know best. But to the extent that we want to understand the relationship of food and the taste of food to people's everyday and collective ritual experience that I would suggest a *gustemological* approach in which memory and the senses are not isolated from cultural practices but are deeply enmeshed in the familiar contexts of cultural ideas and practices.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Leo Vournelis for his editorial comments and to Nafsika Papaharalambou for sharing kollivo-related thoughts.

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