

Three Theses for Increased Enjoyment

Holger Stromberg



FIRST: WE ARE WHAT WE EAT – LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

As a chef I have for years now been passionately addressing the topics of eating, savoring, and health. Nowadays eating is a matter of course in that we eat every day – but what we lack is knowledge about it. In times of excess food in the Global North, eating has, to a certain extent, become a pursuit that involves chewing and swallowing something or other, without exactly knowing what you are actually eating. And as part of an activity that is crucial to life. Please do not get me wrong: I do not think you need to busy yourself with eating around the clock – unless you do so professionally – but even then, believe me, you occasionally do something different as well. But if you have to eat, and it is so important for your body, a good mood, and first and foremost your health, then you really should also pay attention to what you are putting down your throat. You can see where I am going here. I want you to think about what you eat. You make sure, perhaps, that you drive a safe car, have a fantastic plasma TV in the lounge, or shoes by whoever in your wardrobe. You see to it that only the very best will do.

And if need be, you do not mind splashing out either. So when it comes to things that are not that important, it is OK. But it would be great, and this is a big concern of mine, if we were all to behave the same way with our diet. The world would be a whole lot healthier and nicer, believe you me.

Nowadays I very much appreciate that because, like so many of my fellow chefs, at the tender age of 30 I was confronted with the unpleasant consequences of a burnout. I was looking in the mirror one day and no longer recognized myself. OK, I had worked hard (too hard), and achieved a lot. But in one fell swoop I came to realize that if you are not healthy, all that means nothing. As a child I was overweight for a long time – thanks to the delicious Coke I drank by the liter, yes it was a trend even back then. Today I no longer am, but my joints can still remember when I was. Perhaps every one of us needs to suffer somehow in order to discover a personal philosophy with regard to eating and nutrition. That is why the subject of nutrition, product quality, and health is so close to my heart, and so for myself, and not just because I see to the culinary well-being of top-flight sportsmen, I underwent a development process; after which I now see myself as a nutrition coach.

If people were to spend just two minutes a day thinking hard about nutrition they would learn the key nutrition A–Z in the shortest of time. They would begin to realize why they cannot get out of bed in the morning if they eat pasta in the evening, or why after a fatty lunch they feel sluggish in the afternoon. Armed with this knowledge they begin the most exciting stage of their life. If you know that healthy food consists of protein, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals, you will never again pick up any of those brightly-colored packages that promise youthfulness and fitness, but actually contain only rubbish. The packaging is often more expensive than the content, which I find incredibly perverse. And it gets even worse: people still resort to using products such as these, because knowledge about a healthy diet is no longer passed on in families. Instead of being large families we have become single or two-person households. In past times your grandmother would cook with you, and told you what to look out for. Nowadays people buy ready-meals with flavor enhancers and preservatives. All this began with the industrialization of the food sector, when edible goods began being produced in factories and laboratories. For a long time, manufactured foods were the height of chic. Glutamate was even used in top kitchens; my father, who is an excellent chef and in the 1970s used to cook for pleasure-seeking passengers on luxury cruise liners, worked, for example, with flavor enhancers just because everyone else did, and it was the thing to do. Nowadays armies of scientists spend their time investigating the effects that additives such as these have. The complaints they can cause range from what is known as Chinese restaurant syndrome to allergies and suspicious intolerances, which make carefree eating difficult. Only: Thanks to a resourceful food industry, artificial products nowadays (unfortunately) have their firm place on our plates. There is industrially made bread, cheese alternative, substitute ham, artificial yoghurt blends, brightly-colored carbonated drinks.

Whenever I go to the supermarket I take a magnifying glass with me and read the small print. If I am not familiar with something, I do not buy the product. You do not have to eat fast food, nor in an airplane do you have to eat the bar of chocolate just because the friendly member of the cabin crew forces it into your hands. Just think about what it will do to you.

We need to become choosy again. For this reason we have to start off with children, and begin where habits are formed and knowledge discovered. We need nutrition teaching across the board, but we should not teach the classic nutrition pyramid. That is not enough, because each and every person is an individual, and genetically totally different. Which is why our diet has to be individual as well. What is important is to explain to our children is what is good for what, and what has which effects. The pyramid says, eat lots of fruit and vegetables, but some people cannot eat fructose. I am one of them. Nor can I eat asparagus, as I am genetically prone to gout. If I ever eat a hearty portion of asparagus and drink one or two beers with it, my foot really hurts and my fingers become stiff. Your body tells you what it wants. We just have to learn to listen to it. I am convinced that we all have culinary intelligence. It is in our instinct, some things you forget with time, especially if you are attuned to one-sided taste experiences. But you can learn to taste things (again). I experience this in my work with schoolchildren. They have a basic interest – as if they instinctively know the important role diet plays in life, even if at home they never or only rarely get served fresh produce. On children's day I set up what are known as eating stations so that they can taste the quality and try different things. Just how great the uncertainty they have learned is, sounds like this: "I cannot eat that, I have a gluten intolerance, a lactose intolerance, etc." Now it is by no means for me to doubt a medical diagnosis, but I do think that this increase in health disorders that have something to do with eating could well have something to do with a lack of intuition. Lots of children no longer learn to listen to their bodies. What is more, they grow up on products full of additives, which for their part can be detrimental to healthy bodily functions. But if we teach children that fresh, tasty products are best, and show them what they can do with them, then we are surely on a better, healthier track. Just ask yourself, what you are really worth to yourself, beginning your appreciation process with the most important daily activity (alongside breathing): eating. Eat what is really tasty, and not what pretends to be.

SECOND: COOKING IS A MATTER OF SENSORY APPEAL

Every one of us has a different sense of taste. Some people's is very keen, some have a sensitive nose and are able to detect the slightest differences in aroma, while others again who can, well, just about distinguish basic flavors. You can develop your sense of taste simply by getting to work at the chopping board and the stove yourself and then going along with what you do next. Smell, season, taste. A ready meal never smells the same as when I prepare exactly that dish using fresh produce. Favorite dishes are

also stored deep down in our memory. Smells accompany us our entire life, we associate feelings with them, good and bad. For this reason, our sense of taste is so fundamental. Just think of the smell of freshly baked bread or freshly grilled fish on your last vacation, of a really good piece of cheese.

I once had a guest who, after the meal, thanked me enthusiastically and said: "You just cooked me the dish of my life." And his greatest wish was to be able to enjoy it (zander fillet on pistou risotto and black pudding) again and again. It does not work that way though, as every freshly prepared meal has its own magic, its own flavor. And that is the opposite of the monotony you get with pizzas, pastas, and other industrial produce, which always taste the same, and which are sold as food.

But cooking is not just about ethereal senses such as smell and taste. When cooking you can, indeed must taste, and touch things. Your sense of touch is called for. You can feel the outside, consistency, the shape and the texture of a product. Some products are a joy just to touch. Do the self-test. What does an eggplant feel like, the outside of a peach, a bushel of basil, the yeast dough you are kneading? Does it remind you of anything? Does it make you happy? And it smells so good: It is all so aromatic, fresh garlic, chopped herbs, sun-dried tomatoes, fresh bread, melted butter, strawberry jam. Enjoy all the different aromas when preparing and cooking food. Experience how they change as you cut and cook them. That often happens unconsciously, intuitively, and anyone with a little experience of cooking can tell from the aroma whether a dish is perfectly seasoned. Ah, delicious! Keep on having a taste as you go along. Taste the difference between raw and cooked, roast and boiled, sour, salty, bitter and spicy. There are incredible differences. Feel taste, aromas and textures in your mouth. A new world opens up.

Consciously or unconsciously, however, our experiences, certain familiar patterns, habits and paragon play an important role in how we eat. Basically, the way our taste develops is determined by culture, in other words: What individual taste experiences do I have in the course of my life, what gives me the greatest pleasure? It all begins very early on: From developmental psychology we know that babies and small children, provided they are healthy and of normal weight, have a good sense of being hungry or replete. They know by nature when, and most of all what, they would like to eat. In scientific jargon this is known as somatic intelligence. Children rely entirely on their body sensations. They look forward to their food and abandon themselves fully to eating. They do not do so by the by, but wholeheartedly, employing all their senses. Just watch any tiny toddler eating an ice cream in summer, oblivious to everything. If you let children follow their own personal eating rhythm and give them fresh, high-quality products, they sometimes eat more, sometimes less, develop preferences and taste, stay healthy and cheerful and develop a strong immune system. With time they adopt new habits; the children grow, and go to school, where they might possibly have lunch. At home there are certain rules and eating rituals (or not, as the case may be). In any case, this way, over the years, they become familiar with a form of eating behavior that as adults it is often

not that easy for them to change. Changing one's own eating behavior, for example if you want to lose a few pounds or just feel fitter and more efficient, means replacing your previous habits with new forms of behavior. You have to practice this, which takes time and patience, and generally speaking it only works if nothing is forbidden and you enjoy it. We now know that a balanced, varied diet that is adapted to your needs, combined with physical activity, is the key to a long and healthy life. That is the one thing. The other is that what we eat, and which foodstuffs, also impacts our physical and mental health, our efficiency, our feelings and thoughts, our self-esteem, relationships and our environment. What is extremely important is that the topic of eating should never be a compulsion, but rather should enrich our everyday life in a positive, creative way.

On the way to what today is something very close to my heart, indeed a vocation, I got a lot of inspiration from my parents' cuisine. I come from a long-established family of restaurateurs in the Ruhr region, where cooking still had something archaic about it, and was defined by rural everyday life. I can remember butchering day at home, a major event in the year. The butcher would come round and slaughter the pig that had been slowly fattened over the course of the year. He certainly knew his trade, never put a foot wrong, working in a manner that was calm and collected. The whole family was there to watch this impressive event, after all it meant nothing less than that an animal was losing its life in order to provide us with delicacies even during the winter months. My Grandmother stirred the blood in a large pot, and we all helped make the sausages. We then hung the dry sausages beneath the roof. On days like this we processed everything from the animal that for a whole year had lived a normal pig's life and had been able to grow at its own speed. Back then we learned instinctively that meat is a delicacy, and on this particular day each and every one of us showed the animal their respect. We, i. e., my Grandmother, my aunts, who also helped, all worked with the greatest of concentration, gladly, and with gratitude for the precious thing we were given there. A love of food. That was one of my most memorable experiences. Then there was my father of course, an outstanding cook. He kept on hitting the mark with his culinary creations and had a gift for preparing even small dishes in such a way that they just looked good and at the same time tasted incredibly good. He was a fanatic in terms of taste quality, had an outstanding sense of smell, cooked regional and crossover dishes, as he had learned as an apprentice and working on the cruise liners. In our region as well he would cook rather "exotic" dishes such as lamb or venison, which he himself did not eat at all. But with his senses alone he was able to conjure up a true feast with them. I have always loved the gastronomy "milieu" and the search for perfect flavors, new flavors. In earlier days I occasionally used to get hay fever – anyone who suffers from the allergy knows how tedious it is, especially for a chef, who then cannot smell anything. I learned to use my eyes, to recognize consistency, recognize the right time for the right spice. In this respect cooking is a holistic experience.

THIRD: COOKING AND EATING ARE SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Try striking up conversation with others about eating. You will discover that there is hardly any other similarly stimulating topic of conversation about which you can exchange personal experiences. There is something deeply vital but at the same relaxed about eating and savoring food (unless, that is, you cook for a living, things can get a bit hectic then), and it one of the nicest things there is. But low key, in the evening after work, with good music and a glass of wine in the kitchen or for your beloved, cooking puts you in the limelight or brings you down to earth, and at the same time clears your head. All provided that this cooking does not end up in hyper-ambition, as it does with many an aspiring cook, then things can indeed become very stressed. Basically, our attitude to cooking has changed quite a lot over the past few years.

Cooking well, and with fresh produce, is always possible, and without you feeling that you are spending all your time in the kitchen. Consider conjuring up something there for yourself and your loved ones as your personal chill-out time. And do not be scared of getting all those around you involved. If you do the cooking, you definitely do not need to load the dishwasher or lay the table ... And cooking is a cultural virtue. In this respect the French are way ahead of us, cooking and savoring good food being part and parcel of everyday culture for them, something they live out even in the smallest and simplest of kitchens. But I notice that there is a lot happening here in Germany as well. Awareness of natural foodstuffs and a cooking as a creative everyday craft is on the up. As a lifestyle attribute, cooking has been trendy for years now. Basically though, cooking is one of the most archaic human activities and arts there is, something mankind has been doing for millions of years. In the beginning women and children went foraging, while men hunted game and fish; they all then prepared what they had found and caught and together, sitting by the fire, consumed it. Over the course of time cooking became a science based purely on experience. If you investigate the foodstuffs you are using more closely, you will also notice that in a culinary respect you can learn something new every day and with every dish. Preparing meals with carefully chosen fresh produce nurtures responsibility for yourself and other people. At the same time, you become more discerning with regard to flavor and quality, which increases your self-confidence and self-esteem.

Better than a therapist: Cooking is a very social matter. Cooking for other people means doing something for other people. Cooking defines encounters and opinions we have of one another. It has to do with esteem, affection, love. You are worth, or at least ought to be, feeding yourself and the people you love high-quality products. It is good for your well-being, your health and efficiency, and for a good mood, because eating not only sustains your body, but also your soul. The better the ingredients you use are – and I do not mean caviar and Kobe beef (even if it is delicious) – the more esteem and care you are showing yourself. It need not cost a fortune, but first and foremost requires attentiveness when shopping, and good

planning. You will then simply begin to enjoy cooking as you get started in the kitchen. With regard to planning: Always make a menu for two to three days. Get inspiration from good cookbooks (these are available for beginners as well) and write a shopping list.

I want people to abandon their fear of haute cuisine. For a long time, knowing how to cook was treated as something secret. But if we want to improve a food culture we have to share this knowledge. I want young people as well to be interested in my food. Our school system offers nothing that amounts to genuine nutritional science in the form of sensual, intuitive experience. On top of which, a booming food industry with its single flavor does not make it easy to impart this basic knowledge, which is part and parcel of a good life. Children in particular are the victims of this system, and they are also aggressively wooed with products that no longer have anything to with food in the literal sense. Plus nowadays, in times of mobility and flexibility, a large family where people cook and eat together, hardly exists any longer. And in small families as well, in which both adults work, the ritual of eating meals together does not take place.

My parents both worked as well, but our great aunts always prepared breakfast for us children, before we said grace and talked about what was on the agenda for the day, and what we were eating. I know that we cannot bring back these “olden days”, but we can nurture rituals such as eating meals together. They bring people together, slow things down, get rid of stress. Here too I am seeing a trend reversal and think that the discounters will soon have had their heyday. On the one hand that has something to do with the popularity of cooking, with TV cookery shows, as well as with our knowing more about good health. The small supermarkets with a more individual, and in the case of fresh produce vegetables, fruit, and cheese a regional range of products, are catching up. You can support this trend by starting to shop in smaller stores and at farmers’ markets. That will benefit not only the suppliers, who will be able to continue producing high-quality goods, but you too. In this respect I am, however, decidedly of the opinion that just like the work of the farmers, without who there would be no genuine food or natural products, that performed by smaller food manufacturers, who know exactly what they are producing, and do so with love and craftsmanship, must also be worth something again. To a certain extent that must, and can be reflected in the price, because foodstuffs are valuable. After all, we eat them. And in this context, if need be I get personal advice and valuable tips when shopping, or find out where the products I am putting in my shopping cart come from. You should be worth feeding yourself and the people you love high-quality products. It is good for your well-being, your health and efficiency, and for a good mood.

Previously, the definition of food was “a means to survival”; nowadays it should rather be defined as and indeed regarded as “a means of prolonging life”. For this reason I call for practical nutritional science to be a permanent feature of school curricula, because we are living in an era in which knowledge of foodstuffs and a healthy diet are no longer sufficiently passed

on in families. Furthermore, considerably more findings about healthy eating are available to the current generation. We should exploit that.

As you can see, eating and drinking are far more than the mere ingestion of nutrients in order for the body to function more or less properly and our mood not to hit rock bottom. Eating and drinking has a lot to do with sensors, emotions, and perception in general. With flavors, aromas, and with whether we like what is on the plate in front of us. If you allow it to be, cooking is always an experience, it stimulates all the senses and breaks up your daily routine in the pleasantest of ways. Learn to listen to your stomach again, and handle products instinctively. You do not need to be an expert to know about food. Cooking is an art you master through experience.