

Physiology, Culture and Information - Three Aspects of the Palate and Tastes

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Summary

This article proposed reexamining human preferences for tastes in food from three aspects: physiology, culture and information.

The human tongue has cells capable of detecting five tastes: sweetness, saltiness, acidity, bitterness and savoriness. Of these, the human palate unconditionally recognizes sweetness and savoriness as “good”; the same is true for tastes of oils and fats, for which there no dedicated cells. This is because of human physiology. Sweetness and the tastes of oils and fats indicate that food with these tastes provide calories, while savoriness suggests the presence of amino acid, raw material of protein that builds the human body. In other words, these tastes signal the presence of substances indispensable for survival. In this sense, preference for these tastes is physiological. Then, it is possible to suggest “culture” preference for taste. Take, for example, some people’s preference for rice or wheat-made bread. Both rice and bread contain the same nutrient, starch. Yet, some prefer one to the other. Many Japanese, even with their highly westernized eating habits today, prefer rice to bread, saying that they do not feel fully nourished without rice or that bread “just won’t do”. This is obviously a manifestation of their cultural taste developed in Japan’s food culture.

In addition, there is “information-aided” preference which manifests itself at the personal levels. Some people like hamburgers more than anything else, while others love while raw fish (sashimi). Personal preferences for certain tastes are formed as a result of complex processing and assessment of information derived from one’s direct experience of tastes, information from mass media and other external sources, from subsequent experience of tastes guided by such external information and so on.

Physiology, culture and information – reexamining human preferences for tastes from these three aspects can enable us to look closely into the dynamism of emergence of new tastes through the interaction of these factors.