

Tastes and smells of dried fish

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As David Howes (2019) suggests in his review of the literature on multisensory anthropology, engaging the non-visual senses can potentially disrupt conventional methods for understanding culture, evoking a shift from *participant observation* to *participant sensation*: “sensing – and making sense – along with others”. In preparing a short film entitled “Visualizing Social Economies: Dried Fish Stories from Asia” (Dried Fish Matters Visualization Group 2021), our research group sought to generate ways of describing and communicating the tastes and smells of dried fish in South and Southeast Asia. Despite calls for “sensory anthropology” (Pink and Howes 2010) or an “anthropology of the senses” (Classen 1997; Goody 2002), there are no widely used methodological frameworks for collaborative engagement of taste and smell as modes of perceiving the world. As our research effort was undertaken in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to undertake any “co-sensing” activities in the field – that is, reporting on the sensorialities of the kitchens, markets, and drying yards in which dried and fermented fish are produced, eaten, or sold. But this restriction proved, in a way, fortuitous, as it forced us to direct our attention reflexively on our own experiences with dried fish. How would we describe the tastes and smells of foods we grew up with, and those that we encountered for the first time as adults? How do our feelings toward fish products, including those that we strongly like or dislike, shape our self-identity and our relations with others in our families and communities?

We asked ourselves these questions one day in a Zoom meeting, sharing stories about the taste and smell of dried fish. From this conversation we report four brief stories below. Two of the contributors to this conversation are from Sri Lanka, but comment on their experiences with fish in Cambodia (Gayathri) and in Canada (Madu); a third contributor is from Bangladesh (Mostafa); and the fourth is from India (Nikita). Following each story, we provide a brief commentary on the what it tells us about taste and smell. Their stories remind us that our research is shaped by our own gastronomical experiences; our enthusiasm for certain types of fish – and potentially a repugnance for others – reflects the taste that is acquired from our own cultural milieu.

Gayathri Lokuge (Sri Lanka)

I'm from the coast in Sri Lanka, so I grew up with fresh fish and dried fish from the sea. But when I went to Cambodia, and started studying dried fish in Cambodia, one of the main

differences for me, in terms of taste, and smell, and the process, was getting used to fish from the freshwater sources. So from the river and the lake, Tonle Sap.

When you started asking questions from these members and people who were making these about the quality of the product, and how do you make it, and how do you relate to this, they actually would open up. If they're the vendors, they would open the bottle that it's stored in, and would give it to you to smell. At first, my first reaction was like, "Oh, my God!" But then, you know, slowly you start getting used to it. And then I realized that connoisseurs – people who would know this stuff – they can actually distinguish between the quality. They would be able to point to a quality product with the smell only.

Gayathri Lokuge is Sri Lankan but went to Cambodia to conduct research on fish processing there. She describes both the unfamiliarity of freshwater fish and the overpowering aroma of fermented fish, both of which caught her off guard. But Gayathri goes on to suggest that with familiarity comes acquired taste, and indeed the *gastronomes* of Cambodia rely on olfactory distinction to identify "quality". As Gayathri notes in her field report, Cambodian processors and traders make a distinction of "quality" based on several factors. First, they view aquaculture fish as less clean and hygienic, and more oily, than wild capture fish. Second, these categories map to domestic versus imported fish from Thailand and Vietnam, which are viewed as lesser quality and, consequently, sell for less. *Certain products such as the smoked big Kes fish*, Gayathri notes, *were primarily targeted for Cambodians living abroad or tourists*. Gayathri's own observations suggest that in some cases, gastronomic distinction may also rely on the unpalatability of a product to the uninitiated: by virtue of being an acquired taste, strong fermented foods – including fish sauce, ripe cheeses, and the like – can operate as a marker of group identity.

Madu Galappaththi (Sri Lanka / Canada)

In my case, I grew up in the mountains in Sri Lanka, and then I got married to Colombo, which is coastal. And my daughter was born here [in Canada]. So when I was getting advice from my Mom mother-in-law, they told me that anchovies are very important to introduce to a baby, when we introduce them to solid food, the pureed form. And my Mom asked me to just add an anchovy to the rice, and the lentils, and [all] that I would cook for her. I didn't cook her that, because I went by foods and other stuff that I can find here. But then, from my mother-in-law's side I got this package, and there were little bottles filled with ground anchovies, like dried ground anchovies. So it was a powder, and she made sure that I added a little bit, at least once a week, to make sure that she gets the calcium. So that's how early that taste is introduced to babies.

Madu's story reveals that taste for dried fish is taught from a very young age, indeed from the moment a baby is able to consume solid foods. The insistence on dried anchovies in this case is presented as a nutritional argument – a desire to ensure that Madu's baby is fed

enough calcium. But clearly cultural imperatives are at work as well, as other forms of nutritionally complete food are much more readily available to, and widely used by, Canadian mothers. We might read into this insistence on anchovies a firm belief in the efficacy of traditional foods, in contrast to the less familiar, globalized and largely industrialized food products available in Canadian grocery stores, which may be perceived with a possibly justified hint of suspicion. The practice of feeding a baby dried anchovy powder is perhaps not essential to the child's own physical survival, but it is an act of cultural survival – an assertion of identity through taste – in the face of geographic dispersal and industrialization. The seeming obstinacy of the mother-in-law, taking action to ensure compliance by the mother who ignores initial advice to feed her baby dried fish, represents an assertion of rules of taste, or gastronomy: cultural rules for what to eat (or feed others) and how it should be consumed, as justified through reference to quality – gustatory, nutritional, or other – but, more fundamentally, drawing on distinctions informed by social identity categories.

Mostafa Hossain (Bangladesh)

In Bangladesh, Bombay duck – both the fresh one and the dried one – are the most in-demand and cherished. People just love dried Bombay duck. Also, the fresh Bombay duck, normally people fry it, because the fish is very very aqueous. Sometimes seven or eight kilograms of fish are need to produce one kilogram of dried fish. Basically it's water, just water. People still like the taste fresh, but mostly the dried Bombay duck is the number one product, and everyone in Bangladesh, and then also in the overseas countries where the Bangladeshi diaspora live, they are just very fond and mad about the Bombay duck taste.

When I talked about Bombay duck, maybe two or three neighbouring households know that someone is cooking Bombay duck. But if it comes to the fermented product, the whole village knows that something is going on. It is too intense, too pungent, too stinky. So if you don't eat it, just don't go near it!

Mostafa's comments, like Madu's, expose how taste preferences connect to complex understandings of quality. Bombay duck is revered by Bangladeshis for its flavour, but it is also less dense than other species, as the fresh fish is "just water"; only through drying does the fish become a high-quality food, with the additional drying effort adding to its economic and cultural value. Yet Bombay duck is also smelly, and fermented fish even more so; Mostafa's admonition to stay away from the "too intense" fish, unless you are preparing to eat it, once again evokes the tension between those who are included and those who are excluded in the consumption of pungent foods.

Nikita Gopal (Kerala, India)

When I was growing up, we never cooked dried fish at home. So it was only after I got married and went to my husband's place that I really got into eating dried fish, because my mother-in-

law likes to eat dried mackerel curry at lot. So that used to get prepared in the house, and that's how I developed the taste for dried fish. And then slowly, when I shifted to Cochin and dried fish is available here, I realized that there are several dishes that can be made out of dried fish, that became regular in my household too. So I think taste can be acquired as well, just when Mostafa was telling about how two people got married and one ate fresh and one only had a taste for dried fish, what would they do? I think tastes are acquired as we go along. I think tastes are acquired.

This story, which describes Nikita's encounter with different tastes as she married into a family from a different part of the country, provides a statement on how taste for unfamiliar foods can be acquired. In her own case, Nikita went from never eating dried fish to actively cooking dried fish meals in her own household, and even learning new recipes from her adoptive home town. In her reply to a joking comment from an earlier conversation, which reflected on the confusion that would occur if someone from a freshwater fish-eating family married someone from a marine fish-eating family, Nikita suggests that gastronomic differences can in fact be resolved pragmatically, given her view that taste is acquired rather than being fixed. Taste in Nikita's case is rooted in kinship, rather than markers of individual or cultural identity: her initial food experiences correspond, in her own words, to what she ate "at home" growing up; but she began to eat dried fish by virtue of her relationship with her mother-in-law, whose taste for dried mackerel curry dictated the cooking in her extended household. As Nikita went on to create her own household, her cooking practices evolved to reproduce those of her in-laws and of the local community through her own household.

Methodological considerations

The four brief stories shared here convey different relationships with dried and fermented fish, but taken together they suggest several important methodological concerns for our study of dried fish as a cultural category. First, it is clear that there is value in taking a reflexive approach to taste. As researchers, we should take the opportunity to interrogate our own distinctions – what is good or bad, familiar or unfamiliar – as a method to build understanding of taste socialization. As we see with Gayathri's experiences, these distinctions may only become apparent through defamiliarization, to follow the strategy recommended by Marcus and Fischer (1986). Crucially, the method suggested in this case is not actually to critique unfamiliar food, but instead to critique one's own taste by positioning the unfamiliar (or unpleasant) as "normal".

Second, if we begin our investigation of the economies of food from the premise that taste is learned, we situate ourselves in a position to explore how taste operates as a normative marker of group identity – kinship, religion, social class, ethnicity, and the like. We can

begin to observe how taste intersects with socio-cultural collisions and hybridities, as through marriage or migration.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that taste is deeply sensorial. On the one hand, the sensoriality of food encourages us to perceive taste, literally, in visceral terms – through our bodies, as something that is deeply part of our physical beings. We do not simply touch food with our lips and tongues; we consume it: the food becomes part of our bodies, and our bodily reaction – satedness or indigestive discomfort, pleasure or disgust, for instance – seems beyond the control of the rational mind. Taste in food, and in particular the distinctions between what is agreeable or disagreeable, thus presents itself to us as natural and innate; this is how, as Bourdieu (1987) argued, taste naturalizes social difference. We see from our own stories, of course, that taste can be taught and acquired. We also see that taste is something extraordinarily powerful. Taste and smell motivate us to celebrate foods that we love – and, from a sensorial research perspective, they can indeed help us to “make sense” of dried fish.

References

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