

Reclaiming the Food Chain through Sensory Acuity and the Case for Pleasure

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What has pleasure got to do with the serious question of climate change? What is it that connects all the speakers here tonight and what does this coming together achieve except to make us all feel better agreeing with one another?

I thought I would attempt to provide a link between the various speakers and demonstrate why food is and must be an integral part of the climate change debate.

But firstly a bit of fun with a red herring:

Have you ever wondered why the female of the human species is the only mammal that has breasts from puberty onwards?

Hold that question somewhere in your brain. I promise I'll get back to it later. The answer though is relevant and I'll give you a clue: it involves sex and the pursuit of pleasure.

So now that I've got your attention...

I'd like to share with you a serendipitous moment I had some years ago when I was still heavily involved in the olive oil industry.

I received a call from Russell Keast a research scientist working in the Department of Food Science at RMIT.

He was ringing to see whether I could point him in the right direction with regard to acquiring research funds to further his work on oleocanthal, a compound in olive oil that he had recently discovered appears to act as a natural anti-inflammatory that has a potency and profile strikingly similar to that of Ibuprofen the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory currently used to treat heart disease and dementia and is associated with a reduction in the risk of some cancers.

You might remember the media flurry when the news first broke. The commodity price of olive oil went up like a rocket overnight.

It appears that oleocanthal is the the agent in olive oil that causes the throat irritation known as pungency in olive oil judging parlance.

However it was not only the fact that that he had found this Ibuprofen mimic that excited me, or the fact that there was probably a lot of money to be made from his discovery.

But what was exciting for me was that here at last was some evidence that gave credence to what I had been preaching for years – that olive oils should be consumed as soon as possible after processing if we are to receive the promised health benefits and that pungency in olive oils helps to preserve the quality of oil and was therefore an important quality determinant.

When you are judging a good olive oil, the grassy, herbaceous and floral and green aromas excite the sensory receptor cells in the nasal passages and fire off explosive reactions to the brain that gives us instant permission to taste it. And if the oil is well balanced, giving all the receptors something to sing about, the mouth is left feeling totally satisfied. This is an ooh ahh moment.

My conviction is that aroma and flavour are the dietary equivalents of foreplay and if the aroma and taste pleases, it is an indication that the payoff will be the culinary equivalent of an orgasm – remember when Ted met Sally? It is what a chef friend of mine calls the ooh ahh factor.

So if we are to get the most dietary benefit from olive oil then it is in our interests to consume it as fresh as possible when the aroma and flavour are at their peak, when the food hasn't begun to break down. This is also when we receive the maximum pleasure payoff! And it is the same for food generally. There are of course foods that improve with time however it is usually a result of some form of preservation process.

One of the most rewarding results of my involvement in Farmers Markets has been the amazing response from customers who regularly tell me how the food they buy lasts so long, and how good it tastes.

It seems obvious really, the food was picked the day before the market, it hasn't had to travel very far and so it hasn't been stored for months. It comes straight from the growers who only pick what they think they can sell on market day. It doesn't sit around for days waiting to be purchased or in cold storage.

Yet as consumers why have we bought the use by date message as a mark of quality? Why haven't we demanded some sort of certificate of freshness?

Why would you eat anything that has no flavour or aroma especially when our sensory hardware is hotwired to prefer foods that provide the ohh ahh pleasure factor.

For thousands of years our senses have developed to assist us choose foods that are good for us in order to improve our survival rates and ensure we thrive.

The senses do this by working together to detect harmony and balance in the mouth. Fresh new season's olive oil with its, fragrant and herbaceous aromas, its grassy flavours, its mouth-tingling bitterness and throat catching pungency seduces with every mouthful of food it enhances.

It seems however, that the more wealth we have, the more dependent we become on a food supply chain designed in the main to make a profit for multinationals and producers of processed foods.

In virtually one generation we have allowed ourselves to become enslaved by access to easy food. Food that often has a shelf life of years, food that is often transformed into substances that bear little or no resemblance to the original source. Will we ever forget the Turkey Twizzles discovered on the school canteen menu by Jamie Oliver? It is the culinary quick fix. We are no different to other animal species - easy access to food has made us lazy and dependent on a food chain that is in the hands of people who do not understand or care about the cultural, political or environmental implications of a sustainable food supply.

This hijacking of our food chain has led to the near extinction of a sustainable food supply in favour of the easy way out at the supermarket.

This addiction to salt and fat, together with an alienation from the natural environment has I believe led to a deterioration in our sensory acuity.

Where once nature provided the training ground for our senses, for many, we now experience these sensations artificially, from secondary sources that actually trick and confuse our senses, causing sensory overload and confusion.

The body experiences dis-ease!

I'm not suggesting we go backwards or that we all crawl back to the bush, but I do think we are in serious need of a sensory acuity defence strategy to accompany an eco-literacy approach to education as part of a strategy to restore the connection of farms to communities, meals to culture and health to environment'.

This approach is based on the assumption that a growing alienation from the natural environment and a separation from food production and local food pathways, is contributing to dependence on processed and fabricated food high in salt, sugar, fat and food additives, as the mainstay of our diet. This represents a giant step away from local fresh and regionally produced foods.

Interaction with the natural environment and a connection to the growing of food is a crucial and necessary component to the development of sensory acuity and to brain development.

Modern marketing approaches now utilize this knowledge in all forms of marketing media and use the association of the natural to appeal to our basic instincts to purchase, by using the smells, sights and sounds of the natural environment to seduce us. ie forest streams to sell soaps, pine and lemon essence to cover toxic chemicals. They have hijacked the ooh ahh factor with the promise of pleasure in order to sell.

We need sustainable health outcomes through development of curriculum initiatives designed to foster an understanding of the connection between farms and community, food to culture, human health to environmental health.

Lets take the programs and initiatives that are already underway and incorporate them into a comprehensive curriculum that views food production and consumption as an important part of a sustainability model that takes into consideration water supply and land management.

Lets develop a generic curriculum framework that can be adapted to suit regional environmental and climatic differences, in the same way communities worldwide grow crops and have diets and culinary traditions specific to their region's geography, history and culture.

What might be the significance of such a project in terms of the potential benefit to future Australian communities?

- Healthier families in the future
- Future consumers of local, regional, fresh and seasonal produce that would support the efforts of smart and sustainable farm practices.
- Development of regional food culture
- Sustainable regional development and economic outcomes
- Career paths for local youth especially in rural areas
- Maintenance of land for agriculture
- Tourism opportunities due to development of regional food culture
- Potential for legislative pressure in relation to food advertising, packaging, labeling and marketing generally
- Potential development for cross generational community integration and support
- A generation of savy consumers
- A future generation of cooks.

After all communities that can feed themselves are and always will be the only communities that are intrinsically sustainable no matter what the climate dishes up.

We can no longer ignore the link between the food chain and the environment -it is crucial to our very survival.

Oh yes and the answer to the question I posed at the outset? The one about breasts and why we have them?

Well it goes back to the time before we stood up on two legs. Our sense of smell was at its greatest, as our nose was close to the ground. This meant our bums were in the air within easy nose distance and we probably sniffed those instead of shaking hands, much like dogs do now.

It also meant there was a visible sexual display guaranteed to attract a suitor.

However when we stood on two legs the display was not as visible but we did have double the body area to use for attracting a mate: the front and the back of the body. We were also taller and could see each other from a greater distance. So the sense of sight took over from the sense of smell and the breasts developed on the front of the female body to mimic the buttocks at the back, thus implanting in the male psyche forever, their unfailing interest in breasts and bottoms.