WHICH CONTEXT MATTERS?
TASTING IN EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORIES

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Abstract
What influences how people taste the food they eat? This paper investigates how sensual engagements with food, particularly tasting it, become contextualized in everyday life practices and social science theories. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Swiss hospital, the Kantonsspital Graubünden, the paper analyzes what doctors, patients and nurses bring up as shaping sensual engagements with food. It also investigates how sensual engagements with food become contextualized in three social scientific studies on “taste,” “eating” and “tasting”: Distinction (Bourdieu 2010), Daily and Festival Food (Wiegelmann 1967) and From the Glass to the Lips (Teil 2004). The paper argues that the three different contexts developed in these studies, namely “society,” “food culture” and “in practice,” do not help to make sense of what was observed and was brought up by the people working and living in the hospital as shaping sensual engagements with food: what happens before, after and around eating. The paper therefore adds “mundane goings-on” as a fourth context and concludes that contextualizing tasting allows the addressing of social issues. It recommends further investigation of the relations between contexts.

Keywords: tasting, taste, everyday life, ethnography, social science theory, context
What Matters for Tasting?

What influences how people taste the food they eat? Consider the following situation I observed during ethnographical fieldwork:

Fieldnotes 26-08-2011, noon
Light is streaming through the huge window front onto the beige cotton cloth that covers the table. Martina puts a grey plastic tray on the table. On the tray sits a small bowl with lettuce and cucumber salad. Next to it there is a plate filled with steamed carrots and a portion of grated fried potatoes. Martina settles herself in a chair. On the opposite side of the table, next to me, Regula has already taken a seat. She sits in front of a plate filled with chicken nuggets and a heap of noodles with vegetables. Martina takes up the cutlery and fills the fork with potatoes. She brings the fork to her mouth, takes the bite in, chews and swallows. She reaches over the table, grabs the salt shaker that is standing there, adds some salt to the potatoes and stirs them. At the same time Regula takes up her cutlery, cuts through the first nugget and puts it into her mouth. I start eating as well.

Was the way Martina, Regula and I perceived and appreciated flavors, textures and other qualities of the dishes in front of us on the table influenced by the color of the tablecloth and the light streaming through the window? Did it matter that Martina and Regula were female, around 35 years old, had been trained as nurses and were working as such? Was it important that the situation took place in Chur, a town of more than 30,000 inhabitants in the Graubünden canton in the east of Switzerland in the west of Europe? Was it relevant that the room in which all this happened was the canteen of a hospital, the Kantonsspital Graubünden, which, in 2011, provided healthcare for 16,862 patients with public, semi-private and private insurance and employed 1,438 doctors, nurses and other professionals? Did the 8,809 thorax radiographies performed in the hospital that year, the nine feet that were amputated, and the 932 babies that were delivered, make the slightest difference?

People’s sensual relations to food seem to be affected, or potentially affected, by everything. But if everything can matter, what are “the differences that make a difference”? What engenders hierarchies and inequalities? What creates “goods” and “bads”? What, in other words, is the context that matters for tasting?

Remaining in the quasi-naïve position of the student, in this paper I will investigate how sensual engagements with food, moments in which something, as is said in German, “tastes good,” become contextualized in everyday life practices and social science theories. As a starting point I will use the present continuous form of the verb “to taste,” that is, “tasting.”

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the line of Emerson et al. (2011) and Amann and Hirschauer (1997). It took place between 2009 and 2013 in several western European countries where I gathered observational material in different situations and sites, among others, hospitals. During my
fieldwork in the Kantonsspital Graubünden, I observed the preparation of food in the hospital’s kitchen, the delivery of meals to the wards and sales at the hospital’s canteen and takeout units. I had breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and coffees in between with doctors, patients and nurses. I complemented this observational material with semi-structured interviews with the heads of two wards, the healthcare staff unit and the kitchens. Here, I present fieldnotes based on the observations and interviews and analyze what doctors, patients and nurses articulate as mattering for tasting, which I will theorize as “context.”

At the same time, I will investigate social scientific studies on what their authors call “taste,” “eating” and “tasting” that are based on empirical data gathered in Western societies. I will focus on three studies, Distinction (Bourdieu 2010), Daily and Festival Food (Wiegelmann 1967) and From the Glass to the Lips (Teil 2004). Reasons for this choice will become clear in the following sections. I will analyze the representation, description and/or explanation on what matters for tasting, the “context,” that is provided in these publications, which are the outcome of the sociomaterial research practices and process (Law 2004; Latour and Woolgar 1986) the authors had been involved in.

My main argument is that while the three studies develop three different contexts—“society,” “food culture” and “in practice”—these do not help to make sense of what doctors, patients and nurses articulate as influencing sensual engagements with food: what happens before, after and around eating. I will therefore add “mundane goings-on” as a fourth context, concluding that each context allows a specific social issue to be addressed, and I will recommend further investigation of the relation between contexts.

“Society” and Time

Fieldnotes 13-09-2011, pediatric ward, lunch, part 1
Corina Rohner and I take a seat on the bench that has been put up on the balcony. The sky is blue, the sun is shining and the mountains provide a panorama that seems destined for a postcard. Mrs Rohner, a doctor on duty on this day on the ward for pediatric medicine, cuts through the potato gratin on her plate. She pushes the piece of the gratin onto her fork, puts it into her mouth, chews and swallows. “Mmmm, s’Gratin schmeckt guat! [The gratin tastes good].” She cuts a piece from the slice of veal, pierces it on the fork, puts it into her mouth, chews and swallows. She lays down the cutlery.

“If you study taste, then you have to read Bourdieu!” a colleague from a sociology department advised me when I returned from fieldwork. “His book Distinction is the most important social scientific study in this regard ever.” So I started reading Bourdieu.

Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste was first published
in 1979, in French, with the title *Distinction: Critique Social du Jugement*. It is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by Pierre Bourdieu between 1963 and 1967 in France, in Paris, Lyon and a small village in the countryside. Bourdieu interviewed a total of 1,217 people, asking them many questions, including what kind of food they ate and how they ate it. He used the data to draw up the food space coordinate system shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1 - Coordinate system printed on page 182 of Distinction (Bourdieu 2010): The food space](image)

This coordinate system shows that the consumption of cheaper foods such as pork, pasta, potatoes and beans was greater among those interviewees who had little income, or “economic capital” as Bourdieu called this in reference to economic theory. In contrast, beef, veal and lamb, fruit and vegetables were consumed by people with high income. Bourdieu argued that what food is eaten by whom is not, as economic theory posits, merely an effect of economic capital. Formal and informal education, which he called “cultural capital,” also needs to be taken into account. This
becomes clear through the food items eaten by those survey participants who had a medium amount of capital, but different compositions thereof. Those with a lot of formal and informal education and a relatively small salary consumed bread and dairy products, while those with high income and less formal and informal education, by contrast, ate pastries and game. (Note that Figure 1 does not provide any insights into the differences that might have been found between Paris, Lyon and the small village in the countryside.)

Using this graphic representation of the food space, Bourdieu argued that there are three patterns of a “propensity and capacity to appropriate” (2010: 169) food objects, which he described as “taste” [“goût”]: a “taste of necessity” (for fat, fattening, the most nourishing food); a “taste of freedom” (for food that is fresh, lean and light); and a “modest taste” (for food that is either healthy and naturally sweet or rich and intense). Through taste, people, whom Bourdieu calls “social actors,” perceive others and judge them. Social actors relate to those with a similar taste and distinguish themselves from others with different tastes through their taste, and thus form social classes. Taste, so Bourdieu went on to argue, is the outcome of the social conditions in which social actors found themselves when growing up. According to him, by learning to like and consume types of objects other than during childhood, social actors can become (or at least try to become) part of a new, higher, social class. Nevertheless, he argued, the idea of taste is itself bourgeois because it presupposes a freedom of choice.

Taste, Bourdieu concluded, is a mechanism of social distinction; a driver in the struggle for the distribution of power between social classes within society. It (re-) creates domination by elites who manage to define their taste as the only “legitimate” one and institutionalize it in the educational system. But let us return to that lunch. What happened next?

Fieldnotes 13-09-2011, pediatric ward, lunch, part
Mrs Rohner takes another bite of the potato gratin. She puts down her cutlery, chews and swallows. “Today is a good day,” she observes. “There is even time to put down the cutlery.” Her remark reminds me of the day before. On that day, in the morning Mrs Rohner had been assigned to treat a patient with a chronic blood deformation disease. Her task was to fit him with a catheter. Inserting the thin tube into the patient’s vessel did not go as smoothly as expected. It got stuck. She had to begin again. And again. And again. By the time the thin tube had been finally fitted into the blood vessel and the infusion turned on, it was 12.45 am. Mrs Rohner ran down the stairs, with me following her, to the canteen. Once there, she picked up a tray, walked to the counter with the main dishes, took a pizza with roasted vegetables, paid, filled two glasses with water, ran up the stairs again and took a seat at the balcony. At that point it was 12.52 am. Mrs Rohner started eating immediately. Within no time, the entire pizza was gone. Then she took the first glass of water, drank it in one draft, put it down, took the second glass and drank it. As she put it down she said, “And now I feel sick!” She got up again immediately. In order to follow her, I had to leave half of my pizza untouched.
She returned the tray to the nurses’ kitchen, hurried down the stairs, along a corridor and into the radiographer’s room: a dark chamber in which two projectors threw black and white pictures of deformed brain structures onto the walls. It was 12.59 am when she arrived. She was in time for the radiography meeting. It started at one o’clock.

I could now start analyzing Mrs Rohner having her lunch in the vein of Bourdieu’s theory. I could investigate how, through the consumption of a potato gratin and veal, the doctor distinguishes herself from others and from whom exactly; and include as a further dimension through which distinction operates in a social actor from an upward-striving middle class the hurry that the doctor displays and in which the dish is eaten. However, Mrs Rohner would then become an actor struggling over power. This is not the impression that I got during fieldwork. The pediatricians whom I came to follow around seemed instead to be struggling to provide healthcare to the patients on their ward in the best way possible and to fit in their meals between patients, meetings and other duties. At 8.30 pm, the evening following the rushed pizza lunch, Mrs Rohner, who was walking to her office to finish paperwork as I was about to leave the ward, said nearly apologetically, “I always try to make time for lunch, not wolf it down like I did today…. But at the moment there is so much work…”

I would argue that first, if one takes a step back, one recognizes that sensual engagements with food are situated in a very particular way in Bourdieu’s *Distinction*. Moments in which something “tastes good” are implicitly subsumed under, and conceptualized as, a propensity and capacity to appropriate food; a preference and consumption pattern; a “taste” of a group of people; and a mechanism of social distinction between more and less powerful groups. Tasting thus becomes contextualized *socially*, within social classes that make up “society.” Contextualizing tasting socially allows Pierre Bourdieu to question whether taste is an individual’s free choice and to argue that that is rhetorical itself, contributing to domination and the maintenance of power distribution within society. By linking the appreciation of food items not only to income (i.e. economic capital), but also to the transmission of education through the parental home and formal school education (i.e. cultural capital), he can thus point out the responsibility of the educational system in the reproduction of elites and the recreation of inequalities.

Second, what the doctor says—“There is even time to put down the cutlery”—should be attended to. What the pediatrician brings up as mattering for her to engage sensually with and appreciate that what she was eating “tasted good,” as she put it, were not other people and what they consumed, but the tasks and activities she was involved in before, after and around eating. What becomes articulated as making the difference that makes a difference for tasting, and thus presented as the context, are the mundane goings-on around eating. I suggest these mundane goings-on to be a different context that matters for tasting.

In the situation described above and on the day prior to the one described in the fieldnotes, mundane goings-on around eating left *more or less time* for sensual
engagements with food. These two lunches were not the only situations that I observed in which time was an issue. The doctors had long working hours and, on many days, left the ward long after the shops in town had closed. One of the doctors told me that when he got home he usually ate a dinner of some crackers, cheese and fresh crunchy red bell peppers that he bought in a shop at the train station, a shop with a selection of fruit and vegetables that was open until midnight. The recent opening of this shop had, as the doctor put it, improved his “quality of life significantly,” because he had previously been shopping at a petrol station that stayed open until late at night but sold neither fruit nor vegetables. On another day, I saw one of the senior doctors rushing down the corridor with a sandwich in his hand. While walking he took a bite of the sandwich, looked at it, then took another bite. “How is it?” I asked him. “Not bad,” he replied. Later he told me that he had not had a warm lunch for five days in a row. There were premature triplets in the ward’s intensive care unit, each weighing less than 1000 grams. Their multiple afflictions—immature lungs, pneumonia and intercranial hemorrhage—had, as he put it, kept him busy. During the midday hours there had simply been no time to go to the canteen, stand in line to pay and sit down for a warm lunch. Likewise, for the doctors on night duty, there was always the possibility of settling down for a meal only to be interrupted by an emergency.

“Food Culture” and Emotions

Fieldnotes 25-08-2011, internal medicine ward, morning
With a light knock the nurse opens the door to the next room. In the room, there are three patients in their beds. One of them is Lucinda Schnyder. The nurse pushes a cart with a computer on it towards Mrs Schnyder’s bed. A program for taking down the menu orders flickers on the screen. The nurse announces cheerfully, “I am here to take your orders for the next three meals.” “Something positive at least!” Mrs Schnyder sighs. “Mrs Schnyder, for dinner this evening ... Did you have a look at the menu?” The nurse summarizes the choices in a few words, “There are boiled potatoes with a cheese platter [Gschwellti mit Käsplatte]. Or stuffed tomatoes with risotto [gefüllte Tomaten mit Risotto]. And of course, you always have the standard menu with, for instance, a platter of regional dried meat and whole wheat bread [Bündnerteller with Vollkornbrötli] and muesli [Bircher Müesli].” Mrs Schnyder interrupts the enumeration. She has already decided. “I’ll take the risotto.” The nurse nods, “Half a portion, as usual?” “Yes,” Miss Schnyder confirms and adds with insistence, “but a whole portion of the rhubarb compote dessert!”

“Your fieldwork happened in a German-speaking area, right?” a colleague from a folklore studies department asked me when I told him about my research: “Well, then you should definitely read Günter Wiegelmann’s Daily and Festival Food. Wiegelmann is the founding father of research into popular food culture in German-speaking areas like yours. German folklore studies with studies on the
Germanic’ way of eating, you should know, contributed to the rise of the National Socialist regime. It was with this study that Wiegelmann, after the Second World War, showed how to study popular food culture more scientifically. And, as he combined different methods, which was very innovative at that time, his book was also read in other parts of Europe, the United States and even Japan” (Wiegelmann 2006: 304–11). I started reading the recommended book.

Daily and Festival Food: Change and Present Situation was published in 1967 in German under the title Alltags- und Festspeisen: Wandel und gegenwärtige Stellung. The book is based on archival work carried out by Wiegelmann. He collected data produced between 1909 and 1939 through large surveys. Questionnaires had been sent out all over Germany, Moravia, Bohemia and Austria and other German-speaking areas of western Europe—questionnaires in which people had been asked what kind of food they ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner; what kind of food they ate on normal days and on different festival days throughout the year; and how they prepared it. Based on the data gathered and stored in the archives Wiegelmann consulted, he drew up the map shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Map printed in the appendix of Alltags- und Festspeisen (Wiegelmann 1967): Potatoes at wedding meals - preparations
This map shows the food preparation techniques used at the beginning of the twentieth century for serving potatoes as side-dishes at wedding meals. The dots in the upper-left corner indicate that in Hanover (the lower of the two instances of “H”) and in Oldenburg (“O”) and its surroundings, potatoes were boiled, salted and eaten as Salzkartoffeln. Further down to the right, the triangles in the middle of the map indicate that between Leipzig (“L”) and Nuremberg (“N”), potatoes were being turned into dumplings, Kartoffelklöße und Kartoffelknödel. The dashes even further down indicate that between Nuremberg and Munich (“M”) and further to the east and south, in Austria, potatoes were being turned into salad, consumed as Kartoffelsalat. Notably, the map provides no information about any differences between richer and poorer people that might have been found.

This map is one of many on “ways of preparing,” “hierarchy between meals,” “succession of dishes” and “ways of eating” [“Zubereitungsarten,” “Mahlzeitenordnung,” “Speisenfolgen” and “Verzehrarten”] in different German-speaking regions in central Europe. It is also one of many that show that in the northwest of Germany, food was not prepared in the same way, meals were not conducted in the same form and dishes differed from those eaten in the east and the southeast of Germany and Austria. This led Wiegelmann to argue that rather than there being a single Germanic way of preparing food, holding meals and eating food, as had been the National Socialists’ claim, there were different food cultures across the different German-speaking regions of western Europe.

Let us now return to Mrs Schnyder.

Fieldnotes 25-08-2011, internal medicine ward, afternoon, part 1
In the afternoon I return to Mrs Schnyder’s room. She is reading a book as I enter and ask if she would mind telling me more about the food. She seems to be happy that somebody has shown up at her bedside and starts enthusiastically, “The food here is really good. As good as in a five-star hotel! Actually,” she goes on, “I am supposed to be on a five-star luxury liner right now, you know. I had planned to go on a holiday to the Netherlands with my best friend.” She lifts herself up, bends down, fetches her handbag and takes out a travel brochure with a long white boat on the front page. “Look, the program for each day. The first day, that was yesterday, started in Amsterdam with a tour of the canals, the Van Gogh museum and the … how do you pronounce this … Rijksmuseum. Gouda is on the program for today,” she explains and starts reading out loud, “A visit to the cheese market and the local cheese museum. Der Ausflug endet mit einer schmackhafte Käseverkostung! [The tour ends with a tasty cheese tasting!]”

The trip itinerary explicitly advertised “cheese tasting” [Käseverkostung] as an activity to attract potential customers to sign up to the holiday trip, putting the activity on a par with “visiting a museum” and “taking a boat trip through the canals of Amsterdam”— a way of entertaining tourists on their journey to and through a distant country, in this instance, the Netherlands. In this case, “tasting” is offered as an
opportunity to discover an excitingly “different” food culture, which in turn is part of “the culture” of the foreign country that the tourist considers worth visiting.

A study by the folklore studies scholars Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli (2002) shows something similar in the advertising practices of restaurants in Quebec city. The patrons of the ethnic restaurants in the rich and poorer neighborhoods studied by the researchers attracted customers by explicitly advertising their cuisine as “exotic.” The diners who frequented these places, in their turn, portrayed dining out as a metaphoric “trip,” a travel to a “foreign country” while actually staying “at home.” They described their appreciation of “foreign” flavors and the consumption of “exotic” dishes as a way of getting in touch with another “culture.”

Turgeon and Pastinelli’s study is just one of many more recent studies in which, compared with Wiegelmann’s study of different food preparation techniques and ways of eating in German-speaking areas of Western Europe, “culture” and “place” are less taken for granted. They investigate instead how “culture” and “place” are made by studying such questions as: How do sensual relations to food create “place” and “place” these sensual relations? How does tasting become a way of relating to a “different culture”? What are the ambivalent dynamics involved in this process? For instance, how can eating be a way of appreciating the food of “the Other” while concurrently disliking the fact “these other people” live in the same country? So, returning to the hospital, how does Mrs Schnyder’s story end?

Fieldnotes 25-08-2011, internal medicine ward, afternoon, part 2
“I was really looking forward to the trip! But then, everything came different.” Mrs Schnyder sighs. “What happened?” I ask. “A little more than two weeks ago I went to my upstairs neighbor’s apartment. They had gone on holiday and I had promised I would water their plants and feed their cat while they were away. On that day I prepared the cat’s food as usual. But, as I put it on the floor, the cat jumped at me and bit into my leg!” Mrs Schnyder lifts the duvet and pulls up the leg of her pajamas. In the middle of her shin, the skin is red and a scab covers the hole left by the cat’s teeth. “I went to see my GP who, because there was a chance of blood poisoning, hospitalized me. And now I am here and not in Gouda.” She sighs. There is nothing more to add. “Do you know if the doctors are already on their way on the daily round? They should be here by now ....” I shake my head. She sighs again. “My family tells me that they don’t have time to visit, and the lady over there,” she lowers her voice and points to the bed at the other side of the room, “She talks and talks and talks ... Well, at least the food is good. Especially the desserts. Die schmeckan m’r immer am beschta! [They always taste best to me!]”

Following Wiegelmann, I could now start analyzing the dishes on the menu in the hospital in Chur, and explore how, through engaging with these dishes, a sense of “place” is created in the line of more recent research on “taste” and “place.” I hesitate, however, because Mrs Schnyder did not talk in the same way about having a dessert in the hospital and sampling cheese on a holiday trip. “Tasting,” in talking about the
holiday trip and in the travel agency’s advertisements, became explicitly presented as an activity of discovering another food culture, and would have been enacted as such on the trip. But this was not how Mrs Schnyder presented the activity of eating desserts as a hospital inpatient. She never raised Chur, the place, in which these sensual engagements with food happened, as an issue. She just related that it “tasted good.”

I therefore argue that Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes*, and studies investigating how “taste” and “place” are made, have situated sensual engagements with food very specifically. Rather than constituting social classes possessing more or less capital, tasting in Wiegelmann’s study becomes part of, and thus conceptualized as, a way of preparing dishes, holding meals and eating food that is specific to towns, regions and countries. Tasting becomes situated *geographically*, within “food culture.” Turgeon and Pastinelli’s paper, an example of a study on “taste” and “place”-making, also does so. This makes sense because the people interviewed—restaurant owners and customers—did so too. Contextualizing tasting geographically allows scholars to articulate differences between diverse food cultures, and provides a means of highlighting processes of hybridization as well as those of Othering and racism. It enables Wiegelmann, for example, to show that the National Socialist regime’s claim of a single Germanic way of eating, based on the same survey data that he used, had been more part of a racist ideology, propaganda and political practice than a careful scientific interpretation of data.

In the case of Mrs Schnyder, however, as with the doctors, sensual engagements with food become related to what happens before, around and after eating. Appreciating an entire portion of a rhubarb dessert was juxtaposed by Mrs Schnyder with, for instance, waiting for the doctors to show up on their daily round, not being visited by her family, and avoiding a chat with the woman with whom she shared the room. Consequently, I would argue that the context that matters for tasting is again the mundane goings-on. While the doctors’ accounts raised the issue of time, the patient highlighted how mundane goings-on shape the emotional quality of sensual engagements with food. When lying in bed on a hospital ward and having to deal with being afflicted, engaging sensually with food, to take up and expand on Mrs Schnyder’s words, is “something positive at least.” Others also explained how the emotional quality of sensual engagements with food was shaped by what happens around it. When the nurse and I had left the bedside of another patient who, after having thoroughly studied the menu, had neatly written his choices for dinner, breakfast and lunch for the following day on a notepad, the nurse pointed out that patients liked to engage with food—“It gives them something to do.” A doctor, with whom I shared these observations, added that patients were perhaps inclined to enjoy the meals they had ordered as it was an activity over which they had control. Unlike the medication prescribed to them by the doctors, and sickness and disease to which they were subjected, they were able to choose what to eat.
“Practice” and Materialities

Fieldnotes 30-08-2011, internal medicine ward, dinner, part 1
In a small room for the nursing staff, the table is set for dinner. Patricia Candrian, one of the nurses working on the ward on this evening, takes a seat at the table in front of a plate covered with a lid. The two other nurses who are on duty with her join us. Mrs Candrian lifts the lid. As she sees the size of the piece of tomato quiche the lid had covered, doubts arise, “Such a big piece ...” One of her colleagues reassures her, “Don’t worry. You’ll finish it. If not now, then later during the shift.” The second colleague, while unpacking her dinner, starts talking about the food in the hospital, “We are really lucky. The kitchen is good here. It’s always fresh.” Meanwhile, Mrs Candrian has taken a first bite. “Mmmm ... lighter than I had expected. S’schmeckt echt guat. [It tastes really good.]” The other colleague adds, “Yes, the food is really good here, especially the spaghetti bolognese. When I am on night shift I often choose the spaghetti for dinner.”

“If you are studying tasting, then Geneviève Teil’s work might be useful,” a colleague from a science and technology studies (STS) research center told me. “It provides the most detailed analysis of tasting among STS studies on food and taste [e.g. Hennion 2004; Paxson 2014; Serres 2008]. And, it’s really cool!” So, I looked at Geneviève Teil’s work.

Her book, From the Glass to the Lips, original French title De la Coupe aux Lèvres, was published in 2004. It is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork that she carried out during the 1990s, during which she observed wine producers, wine critics and wine lovers in both France and Spain, and followed educational wine tasting courses and food odor trainings. Teil (2001) observed wine tasters using the tasting sheet shown in Figure 3, which she wrote about in her paper “The Production of the Aesthetic Judgment of Wine by the Vinicultural Critic” [“La Production du Jugement Esthétique sur les Vins par la Critique Vinicole”].
This “tasting sheet” [“fiche de dégustation”] is composed of seven rows and six columns. The rows are the categories “eye: general aspect,” “nose: intensity and quality,” “mouth: intensity and quality,” “overall harmony” and “overall”; while the columns range from “excellent” to “very good,” “good,” “insufficient,” “to eliminate,” and “observation of the taster.” Teil describes how such a table is used in “competitions with a standardized tasting protocol” [“concours avec un protocol de dégustation standardisé”]. In such competitions, a group of wine experts form a jury to “taste/try/sample” [“déguster”] a selection of wines arranged in a competitive order. The jury tastes the wines blind; in other words, they have no knowledge of the type of vine, the producer or any other information. After taking a sample of each wine, the jury members tick the boxes on the sheet and complete the form as necessary. The individual assessments are subsequently combined to form a collective judgment. Teil does not specify the socioeconomic background of the jury members, nor does she mention the geographical location, the city or town in which she observed the use of the wine-tasting sheet. Instead, she stresses that the tasting sheet was simply one object, used by experts in conjunction with the wine glasses and other paraphernalia, and that standardized competitive tasting sessions were just one setting in which experts tasted wine, in addition to tasting it in vineyards, caves [cellars], lounges with dimmed lights and leather sofas, and during what those experts call an “optimal meal”—a meal of several courses in a grand restaurant. The perceptions of and judgments about wine made in all these conditions are then compared with one another by the wine critic. Based on the tasting sheet and the ethnographic observations, Teil (2001: 83) argues that perception, rather than being a physiological mechanism in the human body about which the natural sciences discover the truth, is
the outcome of a “procedure [that is] complex, collective, [and] multiform.” Let us now go back to the dinner. How does it end?

Fieldnotes 30-08-2011, internal medicine ward, dinner, part 2
Mrs Candrian takes another bite from the tomato quiche while the conversation shifts away from food to the patients lying on the ward on that day and the orders concerning their treatment given by the doctors. The plates become emptier and the meal ends. Mrs Candrian gets up and so do the others. Walking down the corridor towards the nurse’s office, she tells me about another meal, “A couple of weeks ago, I can still remember the lunch on that day ...” Mrs Candrian’s colleagues and I are listening. “On that day we had had a patient who was supposed to be discharged very soon. Parts of the therapy, however, still hadn’t been attuned. And this stressed the patient a lot. At noon, I brought her lunch. I put the tray in front of her. And all of a sudden, because of all the stress, she threw up. She threw up vomit full of dark, clotted, old blood, threw up all over the plate, the tray, the bed sheet, the bed.” The two nurses who, so far have followed the story in silence, interject now, “Eurgh,” “Yucky! Stop, stop telling us this gross stuff ...” Mrs Candrian ends the story quickly for me, “It was bad. Really bad. I can tell you! I cleaned up the vomit—someone had to do it after all—but afterwards, when my lunch break started, I didn’t have much of an appetite.”

I could now start linking Mrs Candrian’s way of engaging sensually with the piece of tomato quiche to the wine experts’ practices of perceiving and judging wine. I would then see that Mrs Candrian did not differentiate between the sensory impression the first bite left in “the nose” and in “the mouth,” two distinct categories on the tasting sheet used by experts; and her aesthetic appreciation —“Really good”—remained rather vague. Mrs Candria, however, never gave me the impression that she wanted to be a wine critic, professionally trained or otherwise; certainly, she never began comparing her perception of the tomato quiche she ate while sitting in the staff room that evening with her perception of the same dish in other settings on other days.

Consequently, I argue that Teil’s study also situates sensual engagements with food and drink in a specific way. The use of a tasting sheet is described as part of a sociomaterial process through which perception is organized and acted upon by wine experts. It is one way of organizing perception that is compared with and brought together with others by the experts, who, in Teil’s ethnography, together form “the practice of tasting wine in the field of wine experts.” Tasting becomes conceptualized as a profession’s way of producing knowledge. The context in which Teil’s ethnography situates tasting is, to sum it up, “in practice.” Contextualizing tasting “in practice” allows Teil to compare the wine expert’s way of sociomaterially organizing perception with the experimental conditions set up in natural science laboratories. Articulating the complex, multiform and collective procedures in which perception is organized by wine experts enables the social scientist to question the idea that perception is a physiological mechanism in the human body about which only natural
sciences reveal the truth. She thus points out an alternative way of knowing taste, unsettling the hegemony of natural science.

In contrast, like the doctors and the patient, what the nurse raises as what matters for sensual engagements with food are the activities before, after and around eating. I would, thus, again argue that the context that matters for tasting in the hospital is the mundane goings-on. The nurse pointed out that sensual impressions are altered materially by the mundane goings-on in addition to being shaped temporally and qualitatively/emotionally, as elaborated by the doctors and patients. At the lunch Mrs Candrian related, appreciations and perceptions of food were changed by the odors and stenches, and by the textures and temperatures of the objects that she had manipulated during the goings-on she had been involved in before eating. Her sensual engagement with the lunch and consequent appreciation was affected by the sensory impressions that lingered from the bloody vomit to which she had been exposed before the meal. Vomit full of old clotted blood was not the only object raised as having an effect on perceptions and appreciations of foodstuff. Another that was mentioned—twice—by two doctors was human corpses. Over lunch, while having the meat-free option of the day, a young doctor still in her training shared this with me: “In the first year of my medical training we dissected a corpse. I learned to see muscles, and in muscle tissue individual fibers. Now, I see muscle fibers also in a piece of steak….” During another lunch, an elderly and more hard-nosed doctor praised the steak he was having. There was a particular odor to the flesh of not very fresh dead mammals that he usually encountered on the pathology ward where the cadavers were stored, he explained. But sometimes he also noticed this odor in a meat dish he had for lunch. In these cases, he deduced that the meat had been in the fridge for some time before being prepared by the chef in the kitchen. This particular steak, he pointed out, did not have that odor. It was, therefore, “very good.”

**Contexts as Interventions**

What matters in how people taste the food they eat—the context of tasting—cannot be determined in advance. “Of course not!” was the reaction to this statement by another colleague from the social anthropology department. “This has been argued already a long time ago in anthropology, and more recently also in STS,” he told me. If, when I returned from fieldwork, I had started with this fourth set of literature, I would not have had to read *Distinction, Daily and Festival Dishes* and *From the Glass to the Lips* at all. But then I would not have discovered two crucial points either.

Through the “detour” described in the last three sections, I have learnt, first, precisely what the argument implies for sensual engagements with food—tasting in particular. I have shown how studies such as Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes* and Teil’s *From the Glass to the Lips*, through selections during the research process about what matters most for people’s sensual engagement
with food, have constructed a context. As the researchers did not select the same entities, the contexts they developed also are different. Bourdieu’s *Distinction* situates tasting within “society” constituted of social classes—it situates it socially. In contrast, Wiegelmann’s *Daily and Festival Dishes* localizes tasting in a “food culture,” in countries, regions and towns—in other words, geographically. Finally, *From the Glass to the Lips* puts tasting “in practice” by studying how perception is acted upon and organized by professionals. Three contexts have thus been developed so far in studies in sociology, folklore studies and STS: “society,” “food culture,” and “in practice.” None of these three contexts helped to make sense of what was raised as the context that matters for tasting in the everyday life practices that I ethnographically studied in a hospital, the *Kantonsspital Graubünden*. Based on observations of how doctors, patients and nurses ate meals, took note of qualities of dishes or appreciated them as a whole, and of what they articulated as making a difference for these sensual engagements with food, I have argued that another context that matters for tasting is the “mundane goings-on” that happen before, around and after eating. I have thus added a fourth context.  

This raises the question of how contexts such as “society,” “food culture,” “practice” and “mundane goings-on” relate to one another. Let me try to answer this tentatively, based on the literature discussed above, more precisely on how other studies deal with the context proposed in Bourdieu’s *Distinction*—contextualizing within social classes with more or less capital of different kinds. First, it seems that contexts can be *combined* with each other. Turgeon and Pastinelli’s (2002) paper “Eat the World” does this. While the paper describes how restaurant owners in Quebec advertise their food as being from a foreign country and their clients make sense of tasting exotic flavors as traveling to this place, the authors also briefly specify, in the vein of Bourdieu, the socioeconomic background of the neighborhoods of the restaurants they study. Second, contexts can also be *played out against* each other. In *From the Glass to the Lips*, rather than seeing socioeconomic background as one of several factors influencing a wine critic’s judgment and perception of wine, Teil (2004) argues that Bourdieu’s theory fails to account for the appreciation of a specific wine by a person. Third, as I have done in this paper, contexts can be *experimented with*. I have tried out Bourdieu’s way of contextualizing, then analyzed what it allows for, and in the end moved on. The relation between contexts of tasting is a question that deserves further investigation.

Contexts, as recent literature on the subject points out, do not only represent a reality out there. They are political. Contextualizing tasting is political in a very specific way, namely in the sense that it is an intervention. Each way of contextualizing described in this paper allows the pointing out, raising and addressing of social issues. Situating tasting in “society” enabled Pierre Bourdieu to question the bourgeois idea of taste as free choice and point at the educational system’s responsibility in the (re-)creation of inequalities. Contextualizing tasting in a “food culture” allowed Günter Wiegelmann and other scholars working in his vein to articulate cultural diversity and to highlight processes of Othering and racism.
Locating tasting “in practice” equipped Geneviève Teil to question dominant knowledge production practices in natural science laboratories and to point out alternative ways of knowing taste. Now, contextualizing tasting in “mundane goings-on” allows the addressing of a further crucial issue: the question of the extent to which, and whether, the organizational settings in which people are embedded in their everyday lives allow them to relate sensually to the food that they eat, notice its flavors and appreciate its qualities—or not.

If contexts are interventions, then the challenge is not so much to develop one context that exhaustively describes reality or to create as many as contexts possible, but to craft contexts that are effective in intervening in the realities of tasting that we study and care about.

Notes


2 The expression of “difference that makes a difference” is borrowed from Nassehi (2003). While this paper does not take Nassehi’s system theory approach, it shares the assumption that differences (and reality) are not given, but performed.

3 For the notions of “goods” and “bads,” see Mol (2013).

4 The relation between the word “tasting” and practices of engaging sensually with food is not straightforward. The word “tasting” in English, for instance, is a noun used to describe a systematic comparison and sampling of wine and other food products. At the same time it is the present continuous form of the verb “to taste,” which can mean either sensing or sampling. In addition, what becomes subsumed as “tasting” and “taste” by social scientists may differ from vernacular uses of the word. Furthermore, some practices of sensually relating to food and drinks are explicitly advertised as “tasting,” while others are not; and in different situations and sites, the relevance of talking about tastes/flavors differs. Finally, and not least, “taste in humans,” as it is labeled in the terminology of natural sciences, is an object that is under investigation in natural science research. Experiments that sensory scientists present as being about “taste” investigate entities and mechanisms as diverse as “taste function after section of chorda tympani nerve in middle ear surgery,” “implicit associations between taste and pitch revealed through food names,” “flavor perception in chocolate liquids” and “satisfaction in equally palatable sweet and savory meals.”

5 All people have been anonymized and the medical case described slightly simplified. The names are invented.

6 For a study exploring how in Israel during weddings the new middle class distinguishes itself through a “simple taste,” see Kaplan (2013).

7 The lack of sufficient time for eating and drinking is a common problem and common knowledge on this and other wards. In the British Journal for Medicine, the “Christmas special” article in 2010 (Solomon et al. 2010) reports a study on dehydration in junior doctors and patients being treated for dehydration by these doctors. As it turned out, the doctors who participated in the study were more likely to be “at risk” of dehydration than the patients whose dehydration they were treating.

8 Other sciences such as agricultural sciences, for instance, worked to increase productivity, breed new plants and improve existing species. By doing so they facilitated the creation and use of, as it was put, “food as weapon” (Gerhard 2011).
Readers familiar with the geography of German-speaking areas will have recognized that the map does not cover Switzerland. A project to create one of Switzerland was undertaken from 1950 until 1995 and published as Atlas der Schweizerischen Volkskunde (Geiger and Weiss 1950–95). It lacks, however, Wiegelmann’s methodology—the combination of maps and detailed analysis.

A detailed analysis of the co-constitution of “place” and “taste” in France and in the United States through the notion of terroir is provided in Amy Trubek’s *The Taste of Place* (2008). She shows how, in places such as in Maine and California, taste makers and taste producers create taste, place and an alternative set of values for eating, cooking, producing food and farming.

For what counts as “foreign” food and the xenophobia operating through food in Switzerland, see Bendix (1993); for how the European Union’s Quality Label Program imbues food objects with geographical “origin,” see Welz (2013); and for a reflection on the Western “us” and its Oriental “others” in the course of an ethnographic experiment on eating with fingers, see Mann et al. (2011).

For a more extensive discussion on tasting and how it brings together different sensory impressions, including memories, see Korsmeyer and Sutton (2011).

The genealogy of the problem of “context” differs slightly between the two disciplines. In social anthropology, one of the earliest uses of “context” was in the 1920s to question evolutionist methods. Bronislaw Malinowski argued against James Fraser that rather than there being different levels of “civilization” of people and their social institutions, social institutions are useful in the place, the context, they exist. In contrast, in STS, actor-network-theory scholars in the 1980s started rejecting explanations of a situation that evoked anything that lay beyond it and by doing so reduced it to these factors outside. For an overview of the debate in social anthropology, see Dilley (2002). For an analysis of the discussion in STS, see Asdal and Moser (2012).

In this paper, I have operationalized “context” as a representation, description and/or explanation provided in social scientific studies; and issues that are brought up by non-social scientists as mattering. For alternative ways of operationalizing and analyzing “contexts” that are crafted in science, see Law and Moser (2012); and people’s ways of contextualizing, see Harvey (1999).

Much of the discussion around Bourdieu’s Distinction seem play out contexts against each other, arguing that the social mechanisms described in Distinction do or do not hold in other geographical places (Peterson 2005).

In contrast, Vicky Singleton (2012) points out how politics can happen at the intersection of different contexts where alternative versions of reality become visible. Roy Dilley (2002) stresses another type of politics, namely the issue of power between the observing ethnographer and the observed people.

### References


Kaplan, D. 2013. Food and Class Distinction at Israeli Weddings: New Middle Class Omnivores and the “Simple Taste”. *Food, Culture & Society*, 16(2): 245–64.


