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The best culinary experience. Factors that create extraordinary eating episodes

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Abstract

Contemporary food consumption in Estonia follows the global trends more intently than ever before. The demands for gastronomy are very high. The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence the experience of gastronomic satisfaction. Several aspects have been introduced with the support of literature that is used as the basis for this small scale study. The data was gathered through narrative stories written by Estonian undergraduates. They were asked to recall the episodes of their best culinary experiences. The factors that influence extraordinary eating episodes, revealed through content analysis, are presented as findings in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Any meal preparation is a creative process. One can not prepare meals in fear, following the recipe, as the outcome is influenced by the mood, day, ingredients and many other factors. (Talumees, 2011; p.7)

Tiina Talumees, an Estonian fashion designer, uses colour emotions in her book to tell the story about what it is in the world that is most important for her – love for nature, people, food and clothes. Her book, “12 Colours: Food and Fashion (2011)”, is a great inspiration for every cook that appreciates good, perfectly presented food. As Talumees loves the play of colours, she took up the challenge to develop menus (e.g. for a four-course dinner) and costumes based only on colours. Thus, wearable and appetizing colour experiments meet between the covers of her book to create a perfect combination. (p.7)

It took a long time before Estonians embraced this kind of perfection in cooking. If one were to consider what was eaten in the past, one would have to admit that the food was monotonous and poor (Piiri, 2006; p.11). Luxury and artistic presentation were not the issues in the past when Estonians needed to skimp on food. In those

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days food only meant one thing: a full stomach kept one alive and gave one the strength one needed to do the demanding farm work. (Kirikal, 2006; p.9)

Contemporary food and drink consumption in Estonia follow the global trends more intently than ever before. The demands from gastronomy as an art form are very high. (ibid; p.3) The changes in our life practices have made everything to do with food more open, adventurous and creative. Cooks are a curious bunch and Estonians like to travel. (ibid; p.11) New ideas for cooking and presenting food on plates are not just the priority of restaurant chefs any more. Modern home chefs take on more and more challenges when preparing food for their families and friends. Gastronomy has become a tool to utilize one's creative self-expression; it gives satisfaction and enjoyment.

Although new trends find followers, the traditional Estonian cooking has retained its value. The latter is still highly appreciated and enjoyed. Local recipes are rediscovered, and often traditional Estonian ingredients are combined with global trends to create innovative dishes. Even more, besides the interaction between ingredients, gastronomy provide also ground for social interaction, and it makes the world accessible to ordinary people in ways that other things do not do (Caldwell, 2009).

There are different approaches to define gastronomy. Three approaches are introduced in this paper, each of them highlights new aspects that are hidden in this definition. First, gastronomy is fine cuisine; it is a heritage created by generations of chefs and the result of a delicate process (Geyzen et al, 2012; p.51). Accordingly, gastronomy is the area for restaurant chefs and gourmets, for a small circle of enjoyers that take pleasure in extraordinary eating episodes. Second, gastronomy is interested in the physical characteristics of food (such as quality) and seeks for a deeper understanding of eating episodes (von Knorring, 2008; p.41). The latter aspect of gastronomy was introduced already in the 4th century BC when the Greek rhetorician Archestratus wrote his poem *Gastronomy*, depicting food as a source of inspiration and pleasure (Kirikal, 2006; p.13). Words such as quality and pleasure open the meaning of gastronomy and make the circle of enjoyers bigger. Third, gastronomy is part of the culture. It consists of home-made and festive food, as well as traditions which reflect the world around us and help us to understand it (von Knorring, 2008; p.14). Now the meaning is even wider, including also ordinary people in the circle of food lovers, and making it possible for everyone to enjoy the food in their everyday lives. Although the circle of enjoyers is wide, the quality and value of good food retains its importance. The third approach to gastronomy serves as the basis in this paper. Gastronomy is taken as a living tradition that is always changing, yet available to everyone who appreciates good food. Food preparation is a creative activity of making food, in its best and most beautiful form, a piece of art (von Knorring, 2008; p.14). It is a piece of art that enables the eater to get aesthetic experiences while eating. Gastronomy is an art, like music or drama, with impermanent, fragile moments (ibid; p.38). It is the moment of perfect harmony when feelings and senses merge into one magnificent experience (ibid; p.7). Then the eating episode ends and the eaters are left with gastronomic satisfaction.

2. Purpose of Study

To understand extraordinary eating episodes it is important to identify the factors that influence the experience of gastronomic satisfaction. Several aspects have been introduced in the literature. Bisogni et al. (2007) take together different factors by presenting eight interacting dimensions of everyday eating and drinking episodes. As the research was concentrated on the situations in which the eating and drinking occurred, it helps to understand how many factors are influencing the eating episode to be memorable and enjoyable. The factors discussed in numerous studies have been divided in this paper into three groups: the appearance of food, situational factors and individual factors. Physical appearance is frequently expected to be the main factor affecting the liking for food as the meal begins with the eyes. Therefore, knowing the basics of plating food is essential. Zellner et al. (2010) concentrate namely on the colour and balance of presented food. They point out that the colour enhances the attractiveness of the presentation only if the presentation is balanced. Fehrman and Fehrman (2000) take the importance of the physical appearance of food even further by concentrating on colour. Colour is seen to influence eaters' emotions, the sense of flavour as well as temperature, weight and space perception. Also Seo

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