



## Research report

# “A little information excites us.” Consumer sensory experience of Vermont artisan cheese as active practice <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This research is concerned with explaining consumer preference for Vermont artisan cheese and the relationship between that preference and sensory experience. Artisan cheesemaking is increasingly an important part of Vermont's dairy sector, and this tracks a growing trend of artisan agricultural practice in the United States. In popular discourse and academic research into products like artisan cheese, consumers explain their preferences in terms of intrinsic sensory and extrinsic – supposedly nonsensory – food qualities. In laboratory sensory studies, however, the relationship between preference, intrinsic, and extrinsic qualities changes or disappears. In contrast, this study explains this relationship by adopting a social theory of sensory perception as a practice in everyday life. This theory is applied to a series of focus group interviews with Vermont artisan cheese consumers about their everyday perceptions. Based on the data, a conceptual framework for the sensory perception of Vermont artisan cheese is suggested: consumers combine information about producer practice, social context, and the materiality of the product through an active, learned practice of sensory perception. Particular qualities that drive consumer sensory experience and preference are identified from the interview data. Many of these qualities are difficult to categorize as entirely intrinsic or extrinsic, highlighting the need for developing new approaches of sensory evaluation in order to fully capture everyday consumer sensory perception. Thus, this research demonstrates that social theory provides new and valuable insights into consumer sensory preference for Vermont artisan cheese.

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## Introduction

There are many anthropological and sociological theories that examine and hypothesize about food and food choice. However, historically social theory has had less to say about food and the sensory experience of food itself than about what that food symbolized or meant (for a summary of this history, see [Sutton, 2010](#)). It is only fairly recently that research into food and research into the senses have begun to converge and that the significance and power and importance of the sensory perception of food in everyday human experience have become apparent ([Sutton, 2010](#)).

In the meantime, questions about the sensory perception of food and how it affects food choice and preference behaviors in humans

have been left largely to sensory and consumer science. These disciplines derive their assumptions about human behavior and their methodologies primarily from food chemistry, physiology, and experimental psychology ([Stone, Bleibaum, & Thomas, 2012](#)); in short, they assume that sensory perception is a passive reflex to environmental stimuli that can be studied *in vitro* using reductive, experimental methodologies (e.g. [Köster, 2003, 2009](#)). In its disciplinary project to derive objective, universal facts from subjective experience ([Köster, 2009](#)), sensory science has largely excluded “biasing” factors like social and environmental context as sources of sensory experience ([Lawless & Heymann, 2010](#)). The emerging body of sociological and anthropological research on food, in contrast, finds that these factors play critical roles in everyday, sensory food experiences. Therefore, it is likely that a deeper understanding of consumer sensory experience could be derived by considering social theories of sensory perception when investigating the sensory experience of particular food products.

The current research departs from what might be termed the “traditional” assumptions of sensory-science research by insisting that sensory experience is social experience. The orientation of this paper, therefore, is toward understanding everyday experience as a product of social and cultural forces. Social theory here is used to mean theories that explain the behaviors of human beings in society, rather

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than as isolated individuals. In particular, the current research applies Jean Lave's theory of contextually embedded cognition (Lave, 1988) and Antoine Hennion's theory of an active practice of sensory perception (Hennion, 2005, 2007; Teil & Hennion, 2004) to exploring consumer sensory perception of Vermont artisan cheese.

In the last several decades there has been increasing attention and interest, both from lay audiences and from the academy, toward local and artisan foods (e.g. Nabhan, 2002; Paxson, 2013; Pollan, 2006), but there has been comparatively little sensory research into why these foods are appealing on an everyday level to consumers. Vermont's artisan cheese sector, which comprises more than 40 cheesemakers producing over 130 cheeses in a state of just over 625,000 people (Parsons, 2010), is a good case study of this larger movement toward artisan food production in the United States (American Cheese Society, 2010; Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2010). Vermont's cheeses have won both national and international recognition (Vermont Cheese Council, 2012) as well as commercial success. Vermont artisan cheese appears to be embedded in the social and cultural landscape of Vermont and New England, making its appeal to consumers difficult to isolate from the social context in which it is produced and consumed. The goal of the current study is to systematically identify what properties and values consumers find in artisan cheese and to understand the means by which they affect sensory experience.

This paper reports focus-group research designed to identify important aspects of consumers' everyday consumption and experience of Vermont artisan cheese. There are two main objectives for this research: first, to demonstrate the efficacy of a mixed-methods approach that combines social theories from anthropology and sociology to study consumer sensory experience, and, second, to develop a contextually sensitive framework for understanding why Vermont artisan cheese and products like it are appealing to consumers. Based on participants' emic reports and the above social theories of sensory perception, a conceptual framework for understanding the subjective, everyday sensory properties of Vermont artisan cheese is suggested: through an active, iterative, and social practice of sensory perception, consumers integrate their past personal experiences, socially transmitted and valued information about producer practices, and the material properties of the cheese into a single instance of sensory experience. Thus, the instrumental usefulness of understanding sensory experience as social experience is demonstrated; the move to a sociological and anthropological theory of taste illuminates and explains how and why consumers enjoy Vermont artisan cheese.

### Literature review

A review of the current literature in sensory and consumer science indicates that there is space to introduce a social-theory understanding of the practice of sensory perception. When exploring sensory perception, many phenomena that emerge in but are not well explained by an experimental psychology approach may be better understood through the lens of social theory: the influence of (social) context (Hein, Hamid, Jaeger, & Delahunty, 2010; King, Meiselman, Hottenstein, Work, & Cronk, 2007; Meiselman, Johnson, Reeve, & Crouch, 2000), information (Lee, Frederick, & Ariely, 2006; Siegrist & Cousin, 2009), past experience (Reverdy, Schlich, Köster, Ginon, & Lange, 2010), expertise (Ballester, Patris, Symoneaux, & Valentin, 2008; Langlois, Dacremont, Peyron, Valentin, & Dubois, 2011; Solomon, 1990, 1991), and other extrinsic or biasing properties (Iop, Teixeira, & Deliza, 2006), which "are incorporated into the product through the production process; by definition they are not physically detectable" (Korzen & Lassen, 2010, p. 276). In fact, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and other social scientists have convincingly demonstrated the importance of extrinsic properties like place and context to consumers in everyday life (e.g.

Leynse, 2006; Mol, 2009; Trubek, 2008), but these conclusions have yet to be assimilated into consumer and sensory research.

In a recent, qualitative study of consumer perceptions of meat quality, Korzen and Lassen (2010) introduced social theory to resolve previously contradictory studies of consumer perceptions of meat quality. They note that studies of consumer perceptions frequently diverge markedly from actual, observed consumer behavior. Using sociological notions of context from Bourdieu (1990), they conclude that "the fact that there is a close relation between context and perceptions is indicative of neither methodological problems in our analysis nor irrationality among the respondents" (Korzen & Lassen, 2010, p. 279); in this case, "context" is explicitly defined as a "social situation" (Korzen & Lassen, 2010, p. 275) in which meat might be considered, consumed, or otherwise encountered. By explicitly designing research that incorporates sociological theory, they successfully account for and explain what had previously been only interpretable as inconsistency on the parts of consumers.

Jean Lave's (1988) work on cognition in everyday situations offers an explanation of the inconsistencies so commonly found between human preferences in sensory studies and everyday life (e.g. Korzen & Lassen, 2010). Lave's research focuses on demonstrating the contextual and embedded nature of cognitive processes. Her work uses ethnographic studies of everyday mathematical calculation to critique psychological theories of cognition and learning that assume these processes are constant across different social contexts; specifically, the theory Lave problematizes holds that individuals perform mathematical operations in the same way in the classroom or testing situation and in everyday situations, like the grocery store or home kitchen. Likewise, sensory science tacitly assumes that perception – a practiced, cognitive process – is an unconscious reflex to material stimuli that is invariable across different contexts, allowing for *in vitro* study (Köster, 2003, 2009).

In fact, Lave demonstrates that cognitive processes are not constant across different social contexts, but "that 'the same' activity in different situations derives structuring from, and provides structuring resources for, other activities" (Lave, 1988, p. 122), and, furthermore, that these cognitive processes are contingent not just on physical environment, but on social environment (Lave, 1988). Lave's research question about cognition resonates for sensory experience: "what would happen to theorizing about [perception] if investigations were moved to the sites of the activity?" (Lave, 1988, p. 170). That is, rather than bringing subjects into the lab in order to confirm hypotheses about sensory experience, what if research was moved into the everyday life of consumers, into the very experience of interest, in order to build more ecologically valid hypotheses and conclusions? Lave calls this shift in research focus a move to the "outdoor laboratory" (Lave, 1988).

Sociologist Antoine Hennion posits sensory perception as bodily practice (cf. Mauss, 1979 [1950]) instead of as passive reflex. Hennion argues that sensory perception is a learned and active practice in which sensations arise neither from the food nor from the consumer, but from the encounter between them, that is, it is neither taste nor taster, but *tasting* (Hennion, 2005, 2007; Teil & Hennion, 2004). Given this, the sensory qualities of a food emerge for a particular consumer in a particular context, and sensory science's exclusive focus on objective, universal properties is misdirected; in fact, this theory emphasizes the subjective nature of tasting while establishing a framework for understanding how particular subjective experiences emerge.

Consumers learn about the existence of cues for sensory experiences and how to react (e.g. positively or negatively) to those cues through social interactions (Teil & Hennion, 2004) in a reflexive, active, and above all iterative process (Hennion, 2005, 2007). Instead of a passive receiver of the world's material stimuli (Köster, 2009; Schiffman, 2003), Hennion's consumer is actively engaged in her own sensory experience. Like other practices, sensory perception is

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