

BOOK REVIEW

Taste and the Ancient Senses. Edited by KELLI C. RUDOLPH. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xiii + 296. Hardback, \$128.00. ISBN 9781844658695.

Taste, like smell, gains less attention than sight, hearing and touch among students of the sensory turn. Certainly, participants in the *daiis*, the symposium and the *cena* expatiate on ingredients, prices and exotic origins of dazzling dishes and drinks, but the Greeks generally remain silent about taste. Surviving evidence for, and understanding of, ancient perceptions and conceptions of the taste of wine, blood and water, meat, cheese and bread face problems of translation, interpretation of sensual reports, and a certain ineffability: how do you describe the taste of chocolate or cheese or even confidently identify their strawberries with ours? Taste, although tongue-determined, is inarticulate. Associated with pleasure, subject to gluttony, the food adventure concludes with excretion of solids and liquids. Contemporary descriptions attached to bottles of old vine Carignan or Château d'Yquem arouse amusement among non-cognoscenti. Thirteen "geusologists" here address a smorgasbord of alimentary problems.

Gustation studies, the sensory experience and its socio-cultural environments, enrich the experiences of the oral cavity. Food trade and selection, purchase, preparation and consumption rituals (religious and secular) produce unexpected ethnic habits and behaviors, especially when stimulants are on the menu. These comestible usages in turn are reflected in art and literature, even inscriptions describing feasts. Ethical condemnations derive from dietary habits: tabooed raw meat, greed, insatiable gluttony, and over-cooked indulgence. Think of Homer's Cyclops or Juvenal's table descriptions. Food habits "synopsized" civilization level among audiences barely above subsistence level.

Hitch explores epic, lyric and Attic comedy's gourmands. Homer's feasts offer few specifics about dainties or tastes (28), remaining rather bland about taste sensations. Achilles' opponents are offered a metaphorical taste of spear (21.61). Comedy's *Schlaraffenland*, fictive Cockaigne, on the other hand, multiplies taste

metaphors, while it offers endless *haute cuisine* regardless of cost, cooks or even kitchens (34).

Rudolph examines the ancient systematizing epistemology of the senses focusing on taste in Xenophanes, atomistic Democritus and Epicurus, Plato and Aristotle. For atomists, taste arises from the interaction of the substance consumed and the taster; thus explaining differences in taste opinions. Taste is functional for Aristotle, guiding us to nourishing plants. In philosophy and dining, external elements become internalized (59).

Totelin surveys bitter and sweet in ancient medicine. A chart (63) summarizes Galen's summary of tastes recognized by six flavor list-makers (although thirteen in Pliny's palate). Theophrastus recognized the effects of *terroir* and farmers exploited them. We read that the lips are part of the ancient tasting apparatus.

Telo guides us through Matro of Pitane's 4th-century gastro-aesthetic comedy, *To Deipnon*, preserved in gourmand Athenaeus' deipnosophistic Alexandrine compendium. The fundamental trope is that poetry is edible, and Homer's epic characters can be digested into comestibles. Words come out and food goes in throughout this "jocular gastro-fetishism" (74). Nausicaa's tantalizing body is doughy and creamy, as the intimate senses of taste and touch provide erotic synaesthesia in Telo's critical *tour de force*. Marine Thetis presents herself as "fishy and funky" (80-83). Telo explains many obscure associations of women and sea creatures such as the cuttlefish. His third example is Ajax, "tenderized and plated" as a tuna, a fish that advances in phalanx-like formations.

Gowers transports us into a wider world of taste as a metaphor in Roman literary texts. We get a whiff of the rich and aspiring Roman host's prestige through exotic foods such as fattened rodents and Trimalchio's gastronomic absurdities climaxing in "utter nausea." The palate evolves, as the example of Augustine's biography shows, in its views of sour grapes and serene sweetness. Imperial meals in Tacitus provide gustatory metaphors for rottenness and poison in the later Julio-Claudians.

Warren explores the meaning of tastes from beyond, especially in the case of Persephone and her ingesting tart pomegranate seeds, an otherworldly food, in the *Homeric Hymn* and Ovid. The littlest bit goes a long way. Warren supplies a cross-cultural comparison to the fruit that Eve and Adam tasted and suffered removal from their better realm therefore. She promotes "hierophagy" as the name for her trope, an overlooked but prevalent literary phenomenon (105) that tags a culinary symbol of cosmic difference between characters. A simple example is the two tables set with non-overlapping comestibles for Calypso and Odysseus. The

term connotes a literary mechanism by which eaters transgress borders to gain access to divine knowledge. Warren misses the opportunity to discuss Hesiod's commensal gods and men's feasting community at Mekone before the rupture of their jolly banquets.

Banducci explores the articulation of Roman taste accompanying early Roman expansion, such as soldiers' predilection for pork. Texts by Cato, Ennius (*Hedyphagetica*), Lucilius and Plautus broker for us this cultural and boots-on-the-ground influence. Mackinnon later provides zoo-archaeological statistics supporting this widespread notion. Sumptuary laws failed to limit pig consumption. Nurture by wine, olive oil and fish sauces (*garum*, *liquamen*) undergird cultural pressure to get with the Roman program at all points of the compass. Pigs don't need transhumance, because they feed on scraps and acorns (128). Succulent flavor and "environmental pragmatism" lead to the same table conclusion, when meat was feasible fodder. Plautus' voluble cooks provide evidence for many fruits, legumes, and vegetables including onions, beets and herbs such as fenu-greek.

Baker begins from "garish Roman eating habits" (138-139) but looks into the relation between tastes and digestion. What one ate affected one's humoral balance in the dietetics of Galen and other food authorities such as Apicius. The gardens of Pompeii with their botanical remains reveal intense cultivation of edible plants (143). The preserved town also helps Baker discuss where and how food was prepared. Osteological remains suggest that the ancient Romans ate quite healthily, indeed pursue a "Mediterranean diet." They were not fond of dog, rat or horse, although cesspits do not distinguish food remnants from destroyed pests. Different foods and tastes were ascribed different powers. Beets and leeks, for instance, stimulated excretion, Galen wrote. Dieticians medicalized taste arguing that different flavors balanced the body's health.

MacKinnon looks at meat, its available varieties, its production (breeding), preservation (salting, smoking), preparation (marinating), cooking (161) and its relation to status. Apicius' recipes favor boiling and roasting over frying, grilling and baking meat (174). He offers less on meats' indications of power and prestige than texts exhibiting ostentation or starvation, (say) the under-utilized Horace, Petronius and Apuleius. Textual evidence is scant for some of these procedures, but zoo-archaeological remains in Italy supplement them. Ancient Italians knew that feeding and breeding of animals could affect their inherent taste.

Livarda approaches archaeobotanically northwestern provincial tastes. When did new flavors, condiments, nuts and plants (e.g., coriander, pistachios and turnips), enrich, whether rarely or commonly, the Swiss or Danish diet? Since food habits are conservative (187), did they arrive through soldiers' preference or voluntarily penetrate native habits? Through charts and graphs, Livarda offers some answers. Some tastes were aided by association with Roman power and status or memories of the big city—cosmopolitanism and social aspirations (193). Elite foods speak a different language to consumers at home and abroad.

Boulay discusses wine in great detail, as then and now its connoisseurs make fine visual, olfactory and gustatory distinctions (organoleptics), often in hierarchizing consumption rituals. Their semantic judgments do not reflect the same distinctions as ours, especially because ancient wines "bear little relation to wines consumed today" (199). Powerful wines might be called "fleshy," an unknown tactile modifier today. Galen and other surviving witnesses evaluate wines qualitatively and hedonically. Ancient comments confuse taste and consequences (like pleasure, "buzz" and drunkenness). Doctor Aretaeus too recognized the role of *Terroir*. The tongue senses different textures in liquids as well as foods—mouth-feel. Ancient comics mock would-be experts for distinguishing various flower odors in the wine (e.g., Hermippus in Athen. *Deipn.* 1.29b-f, esp. e).

Paulas' quirky chapter emphasizes the high Roman Empire writers' interest in "weird and wonderful" everything, paradoxical tastes included. Pliny and Julius Pollux's "exuberant flavour-writing" (213) is highlighted. Paulas also emphasizes the lack of correspondence between ancient observations of taste and modern. The late classical distinctions of Plato and Aristotle probably did not correspond to "a Second Sophistic obsession with prescriptive language based on" their authority. Pollux' twelve flavors (*chumoi*) include terms found nowhere else (e.g., *odaxêtikos*). He favors the tongue's dizzying eloquence over its taste functions.

Caseau's chapter on forbidden foods and dietary teachings of early Christianity (and Judaism) is most enlightening. She brings in disgust, an underrated emotional dimension in taste studies. Jesus rejected food taboos, a problem for converts from Judaism that Paul addresses frequently. Jewish converts were scandalized by other converts ignoring their strict dietary regulations. But the growing enthusiasm for asceticism made pleasures of food as abominable as pleasures of sex—another passion, easier to satisfy, and often synaestheticized as in the primordial, intertwined Adam and Eve narrative. "[S]exual and gustatory abstinence were two elements required" (240). Fasting and eating insipid foods, when necessary for caloric intake, or rejecting meat and wine with the Encratites, kept the

devout from opening the oral door to gluttony, the mother of many sins (236). Amidst a banquet culture—not only pagan—even Jesus compared entering the kingdom of God to a wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14). Many late antique theologians promised the faithful marvelous meals in heaven. Christian writers delight in metaphors of taste—purity, milk, sweetness of the Eucharist. This holy communion ritual shared with God amounted to tasting and consuming His son's blood and flesh. Taste became a spiritual as well as physical experience. "Edible icons" gained curative powers from superimposed images of the saints. Ruminant on that.

Bitter, sour, sweet, salty and umami (savory)—the basic five recognized tastes today—populate the contemporary culinary spectrum. Ancient thinkers had not reduced taste and flavors to a science, even if they never wrongly wrote *de gustibus non disputandum*. Thirty-five pages of bibliography demonstrate that the sensory turn of scholarship still finds much to chew on.

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