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The Copyrightable Firepower of Hedonic Food Consumption

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Hedonism is the pursuit of pleasure and sensual self-indulgence. When applied to food, we conjure up high-priced luxuries like the Italian white Alba truffle—the “Mozart of mushrooms”—or

the French black Périgord truffle—the “black magic apple of love.”

Hedonic food consumption is vivid—hence memorable. As we chew and swallow fine foodstuffs, we express satisfaction in facial expressions and vocal utterances. When hosts of the Food Channel’s *The Best Thing I Ever Ate* reminisce about glorious meals, their enthusiasm quaffs over into wide-eyed grins, “oohs and ahhs,” and the licking of lips.

Eating and drinking well creates neuronal *memory traces*. Put more artfully by the poet/novelist Jim Harrison, “goose bumps come with the divine conjunction of food and wine.”[1] Where triggered by food nostalgia, copyrightable expression flies off the page and screen. This post examines how dining on truffles can transport you in the writer’s imagination.

Defining Hedonic Consumption

In 1982, Professors Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook published a groundbreaking article in the *Journal of Marketing* entitled, “Hedonic Consumption: Emerging Concepts, Methods and Propositions.” Through it, they broach a paradox of social science: that happiness and pleasure—core states of internal being—are pursued sub-optimally by even highly motivated consumers.

The professors characterize *hedonic consumption* as consisting of “those facets of human behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products.” “A vital component of hedonic consumption is whether the experience of consuming the product is pleasurable.”[2]

The relationship between food ingestion and memory formation and recall is neural. “Memories are thought to be sparsely encoded in neuronal networks, but little is known about why a given neuron is recruited or allocated to a particular memory trace.”[3]

The brain pathways associated with eating and drinking are some of the oldest systems in our human bodies, phylogenetically. Olfactory cues bypass “rational” thought and can trigger instant physical reactions—an upturned nose, a grimace, a desire to leave a place.

Facial expressions of emotion are now studied by psychologists under the rubric of “affect theory.” Strong evidence exists for the “universal facial expressions of seven emotions: anger, contempt, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise.”[4] “The most marked facial expressions of pleasure or disgust come from tasting foods that please or repulse. The facial expressions reflect what is called the *hedonic* (emotional) quality of the food.”[5]

The Goût de Terroir Taste of Truffles

To tease out how *emotive* aspects of hedonic food consumption influence copyrightable expression, this article focuses on truffle mushrooms, whose name invokes visions of ancient French banquets and rural peasants foraging for truffles with pigs or dogs.

Pried carefully from subterranean soils, truffle mushrooms exude an aromatic *goût de terroir*, or *taste of the earth*—just like fine wines. Scientifically, truffles grow in symbiotic relationships with host tree roots. As a primer:

Truffles have no stalk, no gills and are usually formed underground. They tend to be spherical, although their shape is often molded by stones in the soil in which they are growing. When mature, truffles tend to be firm or even hard to the touch, dense, and almost woody, rather than soft and fragile like many mushrooms.

Unlike other fungi, the truffles do not release their spores at maturity and instead have evolved strong odors to attract consumers. These aromas are made up of complex mixtures of volatile organic compounds, including alkanes, alcohols, esters, aldehydes, ketones, and terpenes of wide ranging polarity and molecular weight. . . . These [odors] attract animals, including insects and mammals, which eat the truffles. The

spores then pass through the gut before being deposited in a well-fertilized piece of ground perhaps many kilometers from where the truffles were eaten.[6]

Robust tourist industries revolve around the truffle harvest seasons. White Alba truffles (*Tuber magnatum*) define regional Italian *goût de terroir* from late September through December:

Every fall, Alba is enveloped in white truffles as citizens—along with the rest of the culinary world—eagerly await the daily arrivals. The golden, spongy tuber boasts pleasantly pungent aromas that give way to deep, earthy flavors from its cream-colored center.

But before reaching the table, the white truffle goes on a journey that begins in the forests of Langhe, a fertile area in Piemonte perfectly situated between the Tanaro and Po Rivers and the Alps and Appenine mountain ranges. Le Langhe comprises rolling hills filled with vineyards and hilltop towns known for producing great wines, cheeses, and—of course—truffles. The soil is primarily clay and marl, allowing the truffle to grow larger around the roots of oak, poplar, and linden trees.[7]

Likewise, the black Périgord truffle is named for the “old French province situated east of Bordeaux on the southwestern rim of the Massif Central.” The “limestone plateaus of Périgord . . . are ideally suited to the production of Périgord black truffles.” “Cospices of oaks, chestnuts, maritime pines, and juniper shrubs grow naturally in gritty open-textured soil.” “The Périgord truffle grows naturally in open woodlands characterized by the absence of plant life under the trees.” [8] Its harvest season runs from December through March.

To the truffle epicurean, the white Alba and black Périgord truffle species are prized for their savory smell:

The excellent pungent but pleasant aroma and peculiar but superb flavor of the Italian white truffle is reminiscent of garlic and cheese but with subtle undertones of methane. Chemically, the aroma is dominated by the principal volatile component *bis*-methylthiomethane (= 2,4-dithiapentane). Because this and other volatiles are lost with excess heat, the Italian white truffle is either used uncooked or added to dishes after cooking, for example, as a flavouring for pasta or salads.

Although it does not fetch the extremely high prices commanded by the Italian white truffle, the Périgord black truffle (*Tuber melanosporum*) is recognized by most as being *the* truffle delicacy. Its aroma and flavor are much more robust than the Italian white truffle, so it can be cooked, albeit at low temperatures, and incorporated into sophisticated recipes rather than just thinly sliced raw over hot food.[9]

The dramatic price differential between white Alba and black Périgord truffle species (\$240 vs. \$95/ounce) is a testament to Economics 101: white Alba truffles must be foraged in the wild; whereas black Périgord truffles now can be cultivated in *truffières* (truffle orchards) globally.

Unleashing Proustian and Harrison Food Reveries

The classic literary passage describing how food ingestion spurs memories is from *Swann's Way*, volume one of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. * * * *

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. . . . Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? . . . And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea.

The late, great poet and novelist, Jim Harrison, picks up where Proust leaves off in food reveries. In his essay *The Vivid Diet*, Harrison champions a diet of vividness in order to “live vividly, to see vividly, to write vividly, to make love vividly, or as the French say it, to ‘fricoter’.” Harrison’s food passions began early: “As a grade school tyke I was sent home from school for eating wild leeks at recess and stinking up the classroom.” [10]

As Harrison puts it, “Wine produces memories. If I drink a Brouilly in Montana, the wine inevitably reproduces my sitting at Le Select on Montparnasse in Paris dozens of times drinking the same wine trying to recover from a day of interviews on a Paris book tour. When I drink a bottle of Domaine Tempier Bandol in our *casita* near the Mexican border, I

invariably revisit my many meals cooked by Lulu Peyraud in Bandol in southern France. My memory helps me eat them again.”[11]

In his final decade of life, Harrison suffered through painful, debilitating diseases—including including shingles and spondylosisthes, a slipping of vertebra that occurs, in most cases, at the base of the spine. From his poem *Hospital*: “My spine aches from top to bottom. Also my shingles burn, a special punishment.”[12] Pain in his latter years “has been the primary fact of my life, occasionally removed by a chicken tagine or some other fascinating dinner or say a drink on the veranda.”[13]

Food memories served as a balm or mental bunker against profound health issues, as Harrison’s poem *Zona* relates:

My work piles up,
I falter with disease.
Time rushes toward me—
It has no brakes. Still,
the radishes are good this year.
Run them through butter,
add a little salt.

Repast memories of truffle meals offered Harrison an escape hatch from a failing body. When he visited, Harrison’s good friend Mario Batali would suffocate tagliatelli in white truffles. “The massive bowlful of truffles were a sacrament grated by my grandson Johnny, who averred that he would do this job rarely in his life.”[14] Truffles would fire Harrison’s imagination:

Anyway, I was thinking of lying there on the forest floor in France with a trained pig; admittedly this would cost bucks. The minute the truffle is torn from the ground, I would pop it in my mouth while it is still alive like a big black, pitch black, coal black, raw apple.[15]

Harrison’s all-time favorite truffle dish is *poularde demi-deuil*, or “chicken in half-mourning.” A kilo of Perigord black truffles go into this dish. “The dead fowl has been honored by so many truffle slices, slid under its skin, that it appears to be wearing black (not to mention the large truffle stuffed in the bird’s cavity, to comfort its inner chicken).” “This is my favorite peasant food.” [16]

Mixing Gluttony with Writing, Carefully

Harrison advises aspiring writers “to mix your essential gluttony and writing carefully.”[17] He should know. In his essay “A Really Big Lunch,” published in *The New Yorker* in 2004, Harrison recounts his most decadent meal of a lifetime and the predictable American reaction:

Never before have the American people had their noses so deeply in one another's business. If I announce that I and eleven other diners shared a thirty-seven course lunch that likely cost as much as a new Volvo station wagon, those of a critical nature will let their minds run in tiny, aghast circles of condemnation. My response is that none of us twelve disciples of gourmandise wanted a new Volvo. We wanted only lunch and since lunch lasted approximately eleven hours we saved money by not having to buy dinner. The defense rests.[18]

Dining on gourmet truffles in fine restaurants will cost you a pretty penny, but you can count on it being unforgettable. I experienced that phenomenon firsthand at *Per Se*, Chef Thomas Keller's restaurant overlooking Columbus Square in New York City. Dining with brilliant food scholars and authors—Betty Fussell and Magda Bogin—the carnaroli risotto with shaved white Alba truffles spawned an intensely conversational meal where I could play the parts of both Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn in *My Dinner with Andre* (1981). Our really big lunch concluded just as a November dusk dappled over the statue of Christopher Columbus, whose journeys to the Americas fomented the exchange of new and old world foods we were savoring.

The copyrightable firepower of hedonic food consumption is nowhere more evident than in Betty Fussell's oeuvre of published works. They are an elixir of food memories showing us how we lived, loved, traveled, dined, argued and brooded through our palates. The lineage from M.F.K. Fisher's soul-searching food memoirs, to Julia Child's fame, to Betty is direct. Her food writing career took off with the publication of *Masters of American Cookery* (1983), featuring biographies of both M.F.K. Fisher and Julia Child.

Betty Fussell's *My Kitchen Wars* (1999) is a *tour de force* in the food memoir genre, refashioning dinner parties as “the important ammunition in the fierce competition among our husbands—and ourselves. While wives in sexy low-cut dresses were still a plus, now the aim was to look like a hot tomato while remaining cucumber-cool within.” Fittingly, Alice Waters supplies the introduction to Betty Fussell's latest work, *Eat, Live, Love, Die: Selected Essays* (2016).

Likewise, an Hokkaido sea urchin topped with a long, folded ribbon of a white Alba truffle jumpstarted my favorite meal of 2018. Prepared by Chef César Ramírez, this unusual pairing of Japanese and Italian ingredients brings to mind all facial expressions of food joy I can muster. Julie Sahni, good friend and cookbook author extraordinaire, accompanied me on this tasting menu journey. Apparently, the Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare is the second-most expensive restaurant in New York City. Yet, every bite

composed a neuronal memory trace somewhere in my cortex. I happily finished whatever remained on Julie’s plates during our 15 course dinner/wine flight into culinary ecstasy.

Truffle Takeaway

Jim Harrison’s poem, *René Char* (a poet and member of the French Resistance), concludes with the line, “Char says that a poet has only to be there when the bread comes fresh from the oven.”

Food reveries fed Jim Harrison’s imagination right up to his passing at his writing desk in March 2016 at age 78, perhaps musing about “a wonderful ragù of sweetbreads in pastry covered by a half quart of black truffle sauce, accompanied by a rare old Burgundy.”[19] The idea,” Harrison wrote, “is to eat well and not die from it—for the simple reason that that would be the end of your eating.”[20]

[1] J. Harrison, “Wine and Poetry,” from *A Really Big Lunch: The Roving Gourmand of Food and Life* (2017), p. 204. Unless otherwise noted, all of the quoted material from Harrison’s essays are included in this book.

[2] See J. Alba and E. Williams, “Pleasure principles: A review of research on hedonic consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2012).

[3] See A. Yiu, et al., “Neurons Are Recruited to a Memory Trace Based on Relative Neuronal Excitability Immediately before Training, 83 *Neuron* 722-735 (August 6, 2014).

[4] D. Matsumoto and H. Hwang, “Reading facial expressions of emotions,” American Psychological Association (May 2011), available online, <https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2011/05/facial-expressions>.

[5] G. Shepherd, *Neurogastronomy: How the Brain Creates Flavor and Why It Matters* (2012), p. 124.

[6] See I. Hall, G. Brown and A. Zambonelli, *Taming the Truffle: The History, Lore, and Science of the Ultimate Mushroom* (2007), pp. 56-57.

[7] See https://www.eataly.com/us_en/magazine/culture/guide-to-white-alba-truffles/.

[8] See *Taming the Truffle*, pp. 19-21

[9] See *Taming the Truffle*, pp. 59-60, 73

[10] The quoted passages are from Jim Harrison’s essay “The Vivid Diet,” pp. 15, 21.

[11] From “Wine and Poetry,” p. 204.

[12] From Jim Harrison's final book of poetry, *Dead Man's Float* (2016), p. 5.

[13] From "Pain," p. 230.

[14] From "The Body is a Temple," p. 180.

[15] From "The Dead Food Scrolls," p. 11.

[16] From "A Really Big Lunch," p. 62; and "Eat or Die," p. 36.

[17] From "Real Old Food," p. 271.

[18] From Harrison's "A Really Big Lunch," p. 59.

[19] From "Food for Thought," p. 5.

[20] From Jim Harrison's *New York Times* obituary, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/28/arts/jim-harrison-free-spirited-writer-dies-at-78.html>