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Discovering quality or performing taste? A sociology of the amateur

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This chapter draws on a study of amateurs' – music- and food-lovers' – practices, to show that taste is an *activity* and not a passive or determined state. We use the words 'amateur', 'taste' and 'lover' in their broad senses referring to any form of love or practice, and not only the restrictive cultured sense of a connoisseurship centred on a knowledge of the object itself. Amateurism is contrasted, on the one hand, to the lack of concern of lay-people who pay little attention to what they eat or listen to, and, on the other hand, to the certified expertise of the professional. These three levels differ more as types of engagement than as degrees of intensity. We were especially interested in great amateurs, not because their knowledge of the product is greater, but because their reflexive activity on the object of their passion more clearly reveals the diverse forms and devices, gestures and timings, training and guides, needed for such an involved taste to develop. Throughout the discussion we also examine systematic comparisons between types of attachment, contrasting food with, primarily, music: a historical repertoire and a complex performance, centred on a mysterious state of emotion induced, in the case of music; and, by contrast, a concentrated object, giving immediate physical pleasure or satisfaction and instantly destroyed by its own tasting, in the case of food. The idea was the same: comparison is a good means by which to further our understanding of these diverse forms and media of taste, depending on the products tasted.

Our purpose here is to present and justify a new research programme on food taste. A systematic and critical review of the most prominent research on the subject has revealed that when it comes to the status of products concerned with taste, the various disciplines are divided, unsatisfactorily, along the lines of a nature–culture approach: either food products are just things and their properties are analysed through laboratory tests and measurements; or they are simply signs, the media for various rites and mechanisms of social identity, in which case their physical reality disappears in the analysis. In our opinion, this duality is detrimental in so far as it eliminates the very object of taste, i.e. it obscures the inevitable uncertainty about the effect that arises, about

the nature of attachments, on the variable importance of the product tasted, on the circumstances of the tasting and the taster, and, more generally, on the systematic heterogeneity of the elements involved in preferences and habits.

The simple adding of physiological causes and social determinations is not enough to solve the problem. That would overlook the modalities through which amateurs, in a situation, can reach a compromise between diverse or even incompatible criteria of appreciation. Formulated in this way, the problem suggests the solution that we here attempt to formulate, that of reflexivity. Is taste not, above all, a work on what taste is? Instead of seeing amateurs as passive subjects of objectifying (naturalising or sociologising) measurements and analyses, the idea is, on the contrary, to consider them as guides and to observe them as actively seeking the causes and determinations prompting them to make choices, to appreciate and to consume. In short, it is to make their very activity the object of our research.

Taste: a polymorphic concept

A number of sociological and anthropological works offer literature reviews (Goody 1984; Mennell et al. 1992; Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Bell and Valentine 1997; Warde 1997) or compilations of key writings (McIntosh 1996; Counihan and van Esterick 1997; Poulain 2002) on taste. These sometimes very complete books can help to draw up an inventory of the results obtained by various research programmes on food. In this introduction we wish to draw the reader's attention not to those results but rather to the various ways in which different authors address the question of taste. We also wish to point out the difficulties posed by the articulation and synthesis of those diverse approaches, due primarily to the incompatibility of some of the hypotheses mobilised.

This review¹ considers five fairly precise meanings of the word 'taste': taste as a biological need; as social differentiation of attraction towards things; as a relationship of perception between a subject and a product; as the emergence of reflexivity; and, lastly, as the practice of perception. We stress the importance of each of these points of view, as well as their limits, in furthering an understanding of the phenomena of food and, especially, taste. Our aim is to highlight the relevance of a more complete analysis of food, capable of organising the contributions of all these works into a single theoretical framework whose limits can then be transcended.

Inferring tastes from needs

Why do we like what we eat? Biological approaches tend to interpret our preferences as a biological mechanism of adaptation to the range of resources available in each biotope. Our preferences express our needs and, when the environment changes, a process of conditioning through the pleasure derived from a food taste enables us to adjust our consumption to changes of availability. Taste is thus a biological adaptation (Farb and Armelagos 1985) or,

more often, a functional adaptation (Harris and Ross 1987). In terms of the former, the Aztecs ate the flesh of their human sacrifices to remedy a deficiency in nutrients from meat. The interpretation of taste as a need tends to see food as a universal diet hidden by a superficial variety of empirical situations.

Inferring food differentiation from socio-cultural differentiation

The critique of functionalism and the substantial corpus of observations showing the immense variety of situations of consumption has led to the opposite hypothesis, i.e. a relativism of tastes and the absence of their determination by any general relationship between the material properties of products and their perception by actors, that might subsequently determine their evaluations, actions or behaviours. Research has therefore turned away from the question of perception and towards that of consumption, which is now acknowledged as giving a clear indication of tastes and preferences. Numerous studies have aimed at describing the homology between food differentiation and social differentiation. Yet it is no longer physiological principles, such as the pleasure experienced, that are taken to be the motivations for individuals to adapt their consumption to their socio-cultural position, but principles of significance (Lévi-Strauss 1964): structural homology between the field of consumption and that of distribution (Bourdieu 1979); the effects of socialisation; cultural skills brought into play in the kitchen; table manners; or, more generally, all operations and practices from food production to the elimination of waste (Goody 1984).

By distinguishing the different parts of a plant or animal and then transforming them through physical and chemical processes, cooking multiplies the possibilities of diversification of foods. Time is another resource for diversification, daily and throughout the year, as are table manners and the various ways and means through which people come into contact with food – the list of the elements of diversification is not closed: the person who provides or who cooks, for example, can add to it. Although these studies have the merit of throwing open the list of elements producing food differentiation, they also highlight the difficulties that can be encountered in closing it. How can we account for the individual and the daily variations in food, for example?

This research has introduced a collective dimension to the question of food: foods in themselves are not nice; rather they are nice for a collective and in a shared context that gives them meaning, e.g. the precise time of a meal, determined by a calendar, by people, etc. But to describe the link established between the two differentiations, the analysis of collective determination of consumption has to consider the product as a container devoid of properties or characteristics. All the differences produced by the social accumulate in this container and are imprinted within it without resistance. On the other hand, the signification inscribed in products constitutes a formal, unequivocal system that is always collectively shared.

The contingency of products and individuals makes food changes strictly dependent on cultural and social changes. This is what Bourdieu suggests

when he makes the evolution of taste the result of a movement peculiar to society, independent of individuals and categories of products since the schemas driving *habitus* are the same for a class and for all areas of practice (Bourdieu 1979: 196). By contrast, advocates of material culture defend the irreducible difference between all forms of consumption but fail to show what irreversible trace these differences leave on food and taste.

Taste as a multifactorial relation

Another body of research stemming from the experimental sciences seeks to overcome this difficulty by considering taste as a test of the real based on the product, and by refusing to treat the experience of food globally as an illusion. Instead of contrasting the qualities perceived by actors with an objective quality, some research programmes try to articulate the social and material dimensions of taste (Giachetti 1992 and 1996). An individual's taste is interpreted as a function of the transformation of the taste of foods. Three different types of relationship can be identified. First, perception can be considered as a *juxtaposition* of two determinations: social and material. Second, taste can be analysed as the result of the influence of external factors that act on the sensorial perception of a stimulus from a product or its interpretation. Finally, taste can be studied as the result of an oriented temporal process, shaped by habits, experiences, and socially and culturally constrained or constructed learning.

In each case, it is the incorporation and translation of collective determinations into the physiological perception of the product that are in question. Does the social modify the physiology of perception or simply the interpretation of the stimulus? Is it a process requiring time or is it an immediate influence?

Compared to anthropological and sociological studies, experimental and interdisciplinary research have the merit of considering the body as a central mediator that articulates material individual and collective determinations. But, paradoxically, this body is nothing more than a receptacle shaped entirely by education or by stimuli given out by the product. From that point of view, food is reduced to a juxtaposition of causalities to which individuals are subjected. In particular, it excludes tasting as a questioning of taste by the eater. By placing the accent on experience, on what happens to the eater, the analysis of crossed biological, sociological and psychological influences opens the field of determinations to a vast range of events. But the experience in question here is always passive; its results are always independent of the eater, on whom they are imposed. Tastes and preferences are incorporated by habit, by the conditioning of supply, by social experiences, by the encounters one happens to have. What acts here is not the actor but the factors. But this passivity, which seems necessary for the right conditioning of the body, is paradoxical. Do we get used to something that simply happens to us, unwittingly, by accident, receiving it in our bodies without paying much attention to it? In other words, is the individual totally separate from her or his tastes?

From attraction to desire: reflexive taste

Several 'crises' have recently shaken our food system, triggering particularly rapid changes that are hardly compatible with slow processes of socialisation or cultural habituation. The theories proposed above treat taste as an acquired involuntary attraction to specific products. To account for aversions as sudden as those spawned by the so-called 'mad cow' crisis, two processes have been proposed. The first relates to the structuring anxieties of consumption, due to behavioural alternatives which crises bring to the foreground (Fischler 1990; Beardsworth and Keil 1997) and between which the individual has to make choices postulated as a source of anxiety because linked to her or his survival. The second relates the recent succession of such crises to a social or socio-economic trend that confirms the emergence of a reflexive actor (see Rose and Miller 1990 and 1992; Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Beck et al. 1994). The process of 'commodification' observed in markets is concomitant with a reflexive fragmentation of demand, transforming the taste, from an attraction experienced by the actor into a desire, and thus into active and deliberate consumption.

Irrespective of the position of the authors in this debate, all these works highlight a stronger engagement by actors regarding the variety of available products. Despite the profound divergences sometimes expressed in the debate on food change, they agree that consumers have more interest in what they buy, and that food purchases are subject to more careful attention, consideration and concern. People's reasons for this attentiveness to themselves differ widely, depending on which of these authors is consulted: underlying anxiety; social evolution; or producers' marketing techniques and strategies. But this attention always leads to a doubt and attention to oneself and one's preferences, or to the intermediaries who specify one's needs or the qualities of products. The doubt and attention thus is never directly concerned with the qualities of foods, which remain either external and contingent phenomena or are simply unquestionable. Although reflexively interested in products, in their food, individuals are nevertheless hostages of the social, cultural or economic forces running through them. The fact remains that the conception of taste as desire marks a theoretical turnaround. As soon as the individual engages herself or himself, or undertakes some activity to determine what she or he likes, she or he can no longer be described so easily by the play of determinations.

A collectively produced historical sensitivity

Since Braudel's appeal, many historians have also described the variations of our food, especially through an imposing range of reconstructed consumptions. Studies on the ranking of these consumptions have spawned a new concept of taste: food sensitivity. They have described our food tastes as a historical result often based on practices (see Capatti 1989; Camporesi 1992; Vigarello 1993; Flandrin and Montanari 1996). Like the disciplinary programmes described above, these works try to fit both dimensions – the

product and the social – into the analysis of perception. They have thus made it possible to enhance experience of the product with the practices giving it substance. Yet most of them endorse *a priori* either the hypothesis of an illusory quality or taste of products (e.g. Mennell 1985; Camporesi 1989; Terrio 1997), excluding any idea of the product's participation in perception, or the operation of an objective determinant of good taste (see Aron 1989; Pitte 1991; Mintz 1996). Practices thus reduce experience to a social or material determinism, instead of opening it up to the techniques and means of perception. However, some studies (see Bessy and Chateauraynaud 1993 and 1995; Letablier 1997) have avoided this twofold reductionism by taking taste neither as a given nor as a determinant of action, just to be explained from the outside, but as a self-accomplishing result of a practice on the part of an organised group of actors, of gestures, products, etc. They rely on the same theoretical strand as the historians above, but extend it to the ontology of products – as had the analysis by Merleau-Ponty (1964) of perception as a reflexive activity engaging objects and not guided by an essence of objects that only science could reveal in its purity. Here perception is an interaction, a doing that knows it is perceiving – but which is not the revealing of – a given to be perceived.

Finally, the conjunction of all these works highlights a variety of characteristics of the food phenomenon: a physiological phenomenon, engaging a product and a perceiving body; a collective phenomenon, both cultural and social, inscribing perception in a frame that is shared to a greater or lesser degree; and a situated phenomenon, in time and space, engaging practices that shape the perception of an increasingly reflexive being. But unfortunately the compartmentalisation of disciplinary specialities leads to a reduction in the phenomenon observed, producing incompatibility between the hypotheses mobilised. Adaptive devices, or those of biological or social incorporation, can explain the origins of complex determinations that pluridisciplinary programmes have tried to group together in the same theoretical framework. But that framework of determinations is incompatible with the idea of a reflexive taste which is an activity and the result of historically constituted practices – unless it reduces the practices themselves to the transmission of determinations.

The extension of the theoretical framework to these results therefore requires a reconceptualisation and reshaping of the analytical tools used to account for all of these aspects of taste.

Analysing taste as an activity

The main shift in the analytical position we defend, to underscore the crucial limitations of the current works on taste discussed above, relates to the status we give to taste as its own main descriptor, analyst and producer. We do not conceive of our work as a long process of tracking diverse kinds of external determinations that help to explain why different people have differing

tastes. Different people in different situations bring into play a collective knowledge, of which taste is a result. In other words, taste is a way of building relationships, with things and with people; it is not simply a property of goods, nor is it a competence of people.

The work presented here is based on comparative ethnographical observations of wine amateurs and gourmets, on the one hand, and music lovers on the other. The comparison of music and wine or food was aimed at providing evidence about the relationship between the amateur and what she or he likes, beyond native self-descriptions that always insist on the radical specificity of each object of love.

One of the crucial challenges, if one wants to respect the variety of amateurs' practices, is to be able to analytically display the modalities of those practices, knowing that they can vary widely inside each form. The main measurable modalities that we first identified empirically, and that we will reformulate below into a more analytical framework, are:

- the degree of involvement (in time, money, personal relations, etc.);
- the central social form that performing the activity requires (collectively or in a solitary way, going out often or mostly practising at home, independently or relying on a network of friends and/or other amateurs);
- the long-term physical training or level of engagement required (for instance, in the case of singing or playing an instrument the level required is very high, and in the case of wine-tasting it is high yet more concentrated, though it may be much more diffused, as in the case of gastronomy; or it can be undertaken mostly collectively in a more or less overt way, as it is for a rock band);
- the physical form taken by the product, which leads to typical amateur practices like collecting old or specific repertoires and/or over-investing in technical knowledge about production (like amateurs who continually tinker with instruments or hi-fi, or wine-lovers who dream about making their own wine). This includes the extent and commercial availability of 'catalogues', giving easy access to the object of passion (a typical case being music, which is recordable), and the existence of a more or less wide range of technical sets and devices considered as the 'equipment' or the 'material' of the activity (like hi-fi for music, or glasses, corkscrews and, of course, the cellar, for wine).

Other modalities can be more or less crucial, depending on the activity, in particular the depth of its tradition, the existence of a specific and elaborated vocabulary, the size and variety of the available 'library' dealing with its various aspects (guides, books, critiques, secondary literature, amateurs' chronicles, novels, etc.), the formalisation of training or education and, more broadly, the level of social recognition, valorisation and institutionalisation.

A matter of method: beyond external accounts or arbitrary outside references

Amateurs are our informants

Based on a method we had already used to analyse the advertising profession and its practical theories about objects and desire (Hennion and Méadel 1989), we focus here on the study of the practices of amateurs – ways of doing things, manners, obsessive procedures, use of books and guides, and so on – and consider them as *our* experts in order to understand how taste works, rather than placing ourselves in the position of experts and theorising on the basis of supposedly tacit understandings and informal knowledge of which they are not themselves aware.

Comparing amateurs in various fields, we discover many different views of what it is to like something, or to be an amateur practitioner, but most of them are reflexively and collectively debated and empirically tested by amateurs themselves. In particular, amateurs seem very good at mobilising, combining or refusing different modes of tasting in practice. Briefly, as we argue below, if we focus on the objects, on the collective, on the self, on conditions and technical devices, we see modes of appreciation that resemble the rival bases on which disciplines and knowledge have built their theoretical models – physics and bio-chemistry, sociology, psychology and sciences of cognition, and technical expertise.

This shift of focus completely changes the nature of our accounts, and the status of major questions about quality. If we consider amateurs as our informants, instead of deciphering them with our theoretical preconceptions, these questions become difficult issues in their debates and experiments, instead of being dogmatic and definitive answers defended by each theory. Does one need others' recommendations to like good products or to be sensitive to high quality? Do tastes depend on objective features or properties of the products, or are they dependent mostly on each person's profound attachments? Must the relationship with the objects be purified and made independent of any circumstances? Or, on the contrary, is the pleasure of things always related to a whole situation, much of the art of tasting being the ability to put oneself into the right conditions? What is predetermined and what is radically unpredictable in the feeling that something is good (whatever definition one gives of that quality of things)?

Amateurs *do* find their own answers, defining what we call diverse formats of amateurship, except these answers do not look like definite and coherent determinations relating to theoretical models which scientists are then paid to rationalise (Teil 2004). On the contrary, they are provisional and incoherent trials, self-realising modalities, focusing on diverse and contradictory aspects of taste, moving from one to the other. The test of their validity is part of taste itself, which cannot be separated from the whole set of collective practices and long-term relationships with a repertoire of things.

Our aim, then, is not to extract from interviews and observations with amateurs the objective grounds of a pleasure, a feeling or a taste that they

would ordinarily experience only as subjective, implicit representations largely blind to their own determinations. Conceiving of taste as amateurs' experimental ongoing activity, an accomplishment that continually takes into account its own results to modify itself and its procedures, we aim to promote amateurs to the rank of experts, to acknowledge their ability to be the reflexive managers of their own taste. In so doing we simply repeat the fundamental gesture of the ethnomethodologists who restore to the actors themselves the social competences employed in producing the categories of their own worlds and actions (Garfinkel 1967). At this stage one of our goals is to take advantage of the extensive know-how amateurs display when looking for what they prefer, administering their pleasure, evaluating, trying out, judging in a situation or changing their diagnoses, in order to put to the test and formulate, together with them, some of the modalities of taste. But, beyond these *ad hoc* momentary tricks of the trade, it is also in the long term that amateurs have been the architects of their own ability to appreciate things and the forgers of the frameworks of their tastes. As much at a personal as at a collective level, tastes have a history (and this is why the plural is necessary here). They are anything but pure and natural properties which have had to fabricate themselves through the invention of formats and repertoires, devices and abilities, all elements which amateurs of diverse products or domains have progressively set up by passionately debating them collectively.

This is why the neo-ethnomethodological posture for which we plead insists on taste as a reflexive and performative capacity, opposed to any possibility of seeing it as an objectified reality which scientific knowledge could account for from the outside. The reflexive nature of an activity (an issue here at its zero degree due simply to the act of putting oneself into an identified disposition) does not assume that there is necessarily reflection by actors – which implies a degree of calculation and awareness of what one does at a far higher level, and the passage from a simple variation in our modes of presence in situations to the level of deliberate action (Ricoeur 1990). After its seminal presentation by Clifford and Marcus (1986), the many aspects of the reflexivity thesis, focusing on crucial problems for us, such as intimacy, the body and the use of social theories by actors themselves, have been thoroughly debated (e.g. by Beck et al. 1994). Concerned mostly with political matters and a characterisation of modernity, however, reflexivity as seen by Beck et al. applies only to the social construction of identities and agencies, inside a stable macro-sociological conception of the collective. Science and technology studies proposed a use of the word closer to ours, when addressing objects and collectives (Woolgar 1988; Ashmore 1989).

This may be too general a claim, but it happens to be very efficient in the precise domain of taste, which by now we have shown to be dramatically spread between rival disciplines, as if they were competing to give *the* definitive account of what good taste is, or *the* quality of, things is. We now raise a number of questions, present some of the results of our method and show its efficiency in getting away from aporetic binary debates in the field.

Tasting, listening to or appreciating something are essentially silent activities. Does this mean it is only tacit, condemned to its mysterious status of an internal, profoundly subjective, unspeakable reality? We do not claim to bring to a close such a longstanding debate, rather perhaps just to recall how much this silent activity constantly resorts to words by many different means, and that on this matter too it might be time to abandon radical dualisms. We simply chose an appropriate case in this respect, focusing our inquiry on great amateurs, those most likely to make extensive use of diverse types of wording for their practices. Great amateurs can be an *overt* source of information.

Another way of avoiding exteriority: interviewers' complementary experiences

One way of taking advantage of the comparison of music and wine or food was to use our complementary competences and weaknesses: one of us is a semi-professional expert wine-taster who enjoys music, the other is a music-lover and a former musicologist and a *petit amateur* of wine. We can thus use our own bodies, preferences, knowledge and prejudices as touchstones and variables implied in our experiments, instead of putting our own status as amateurs in brackets, as is usually done by social scientists, on topics where belonging to a group of great amateurs, being a connoisseur or simply 'knowing a little what all this is about' are so crucial in interviews. The interviewer's level of amateurship completely modifies the kind of discourse and observation she or he can get from great amateurs, who never enter into 'the real thing' in front of the uninitiated. And if we are among great amateurs, the danger is, conversely, of regarding the love of music or wine as an apprenticeship, a mere process of acquiring knowledge and corporal ability, the quality of the object being taken as an evidence. Our mutual lack of expertise allows us to be more symmetrical and forbids either of us to mobilise any interpretation by taking for granted that some perceptions are the good, or correct, ones and others are 'biased'. That is to say, models of taste presume that there is some direct or objective perception of any item under scrutiny and that divergence from that given, orthodox or taken-for-granted manner of appropriation constitutes a biased view. Yet we see no basis for such a presumption since all principles of perception are at the same level and have equal validity.

Music is described mostly as a *performance*, on the one hand, and is referred to as an art work, on the other, while wine is above all a *product* – even if it is interesting to note that, when trying to promote the quality of their taste, wine amateurs tend to talk about it in terms both of aesthetics and, to a lesser extent, of a physical and mental conditioning, so that tasting resembles a music concert. Our comparative method then just prolongs the amateurs tendency to use the same words to describe wine or music. Using the specific features of each product to see how they apply to the other makes it possible to describe empirically diverse formats of amateurship independently (at least relatively so) of the objects of this attention, that is to say, formats are not directly deduced from supposed intrinsic properties of

either wine–food or music. It does not mean that there is no difference between listening to music and drinking wine, but an account has to be given for those differences within the taste relationship, not as the result of external predetermining factors.

Let us begin with a short example, in order to show the combination and incompatibilities of diverse forms of amateurship. We consider here the case of Raoul who is both an amateur wine enthusiast and a music-lover. He does favour specific wines and music over others. In the case of wine, he discovers and tries first those which are the best in order to guide his perception and to be sure to avoid mistakes in his perception of the quality of the wine he buys. Therefore he is very attentive to what experts say; he listens to connoisseur friends' opinions, buys many books and guides in order to increase his knowledge, and tries to adjust his perception to the described quality of wines.

He considers music, however, to be completely different from wine, in that music is something abstract that generates emotions, and, for him, the quality of the music he listens to is related to the quality of the emotions he personally perceives – emotions which are strongly related to his past experiences and the capacity of that music to evoke past experiences. Thus, where music is concerned, he never relies on others' advice; he considers it inapplicable to his case. He listens to music on the radio, waiting for a casual encounter with something he likes; he hears the music his friends play to him, but he never directly follows their opinions. He just takes his opportunities to get to know new music, and whenever he likes a piece, its creator or the musician performing it, he purchases accordingly.

Let us regard him first as a wine-lover. If taste is considered a property of a taster, then Raoul will appear to be biased according to the relevant criteria because he does not let himself express his own taste. The bias may then be explained by psychological factors: a lack of self-reliance and in its place the influence of experts on the *proper* judgement of the actor. If, instead, taste is considered as a collective process, one might interpret the case in terms of sociological categories, the belonging of the actor to a kind of structuring/structured circle of social differentiation. If one considers taste as a property of the thing tasted, then one will take this case as a probe of the necessity of an apprenticeship in learning its objective characteristics, and such an apprenticeship is best provided by scientific procedures. Then, as with each time the question is set in terms of biased perception, one needs to give explanations of those 'biases', and to explain them by, for instance, psychological factors. In any case, from diverse and sometimes contradictory points of view, one always emphasises that taste is the result of a configuration of the amateur–object relationship.

And what about music? Raoul's behaviour might be considered as fitting very well a cognitive theory of tastes, seen as a series of experiments on one's own feelings. All other theoretical explanations – aesthetic, sociological, etc. – will, on the contrary, insist on his biased behaviour, but for different

reasons. The same person whose tasting of wine was biased because he was following the evaluations of others now obeys only his own feelings. He can nevertheless be said to have a biased taste, but this time because he is not aware of musical relevance. He does not engage in aesthetic judgement; he is not aware of the unconsciously determined nature of his pretended spontaneous preferences, and so on. What, then, is the case? Do we have to adapt each explanation to each empirical case? A better solution is to turn things upside down: those rationalised and incompatible principles, forcing all the practical configurations that real amateurs set up to be deciphered as diverse biases, are simply the basic elements on which amateurs themselves continually put to the test, elaborate, discuss, oppose and link together in the diverse moments and within the constraints of their taste. But, except in rare cases, they do not try to purify them and make one of them *the* only principle of taste; rather, they just try and then move on, in a much more variable and flexible way than they themselves acknowledge, describing these well-known stages which all great amateurs seem to have passed through ('Oh, you're in your "only old sticks phase"', or 'Oh, yes, French opera is just light music? Well, let's just wait to hear what you'll say in three years' time!'), and of whose character, as dogmatic and assertive as it is limited and provisional, they are keenly aware.

Taste as a reflexive and performative activity: a fourfold scheme

Things to be liked, a collective of tasters, devices and techniques, the taster's 'body and soul'

Whatever the taste device – a meal with friends, listening to a recording in the lounge, a wine-tasting in a shop, a concert, a wine contest, even a scientific experiment – the judgements on taste and quality uttered for the occasion proliferate. Most of the people present do not agree; indeed, an individual, even if isolated, may change her or his mind.

Most of the existing research works are dedicated to *explaining* the variety of such judgements. Without trying to characterise it in any essential way, we have tried to define a kind of 'scaffold', a four-legged stool, which for us simply has the provisional status of an empty frame in which attachments can be elaborated. As a sort of minimalist hypothesis (but this too can be debated), we have assumed that each leg, alone or combined, mobilises the following four main definitions:

- taste as a property of the thing tasted;
- taste as a collective process;
- taste as a result of a device;
- taste as an attribute proper (*caractère propre*) of a taster.

We could immediately add, for instance, taste as a historical process (this can be included in taste as a collective process), or taste as a behaviour (an extension of the taster's competences). But the main point concerns not the relevance or exhaustiveness of this grid but rather the status of its basic

elements. Our intention is to return them to the actors themselves, and to describe disciplines as rival ways of rationalising and purifying each of them, having snatched that common knowledge from the amateurs' reflexive competences and transformed it into an objective science.

Nothing present if not made present

Let us go back to the four legs of our simple stool (they are nothing more than those displayed by most multifactor analyses of taste). None of these elements is to be taken as *given*, or natural and pre-existing. This is true of the products of *all* tasted objects. The plural form is more appropriate for, as music demonstrates, tasting is not only about *the* work or *the* 'objects' because it passes through a number of intermediate objects. These could include the grooves of a record, the sound of an instrument, the atmosphere of the room, a voice, the body of a performer, scores, gestures – all objects whose relative importance in the performance is passionately debated by music-lovers from opposed aesthetic positions. On the contrary, these elements (products, collectives, devices and things tested) are continually tested, uncertain, tentative, appearing *in situ* and in the process of performance, as they are both the means and the products of the amateurs' activity.

The same applies to amateurs' collectives. Sociology proceeds a little too quickly, as if it were the exclusive gate-keeper of this register. It takes this modality of amateurism out of the reach of amateurs, elaborates it as an autonomous, systematic, external causality, and finally turns it back against the amateurs, as the hidden principle of their activity, revealed to them in spite of their resistances and denials by a heroic sociologist. This figure of the amateur is far from any real situation. On the contrary, amateurs know well that there is no amateur as long as one is alone in front of some good things to taste. Amateurism begins with the confrontation with others' tastes: those of some other amateurs functioning as models forcing one to deprecate what one loved, and to love what one despised, and those of some other people functioning as foils helping one to get rid of inappropriate tastes. Far from being mere *snobbishness*, this collective production of a common elaborated taste is a very powerful way of experiencing the stability, durability and various types of *respondance* – that is, the ability to respond – that objects of love may have and, conversely, of producing the collective ability to perceive these differences and give them more and more worth: the antonym of love is not hatred, but indifference.

Until now, we have been in the territory of the usual debates about the objects of art, or taste, and sociology. But, the other elements open up this space, in which love may display itself, even more. The material devices of the activity are crucial because they are the concrete mediations supporting most of the real debates about taste (Hennion 1993; Teil 2001). One glass for clarets, another for Burgundy wines. As regards the baroque revival in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hennion 1997), what was reported afterwards in terms of dual aesthetic and commercial oppositions between

two clear camps was above all a systematic calling into question of each medium, device and object of the musical performance: pitch, voice, instruments, size of orchestra, tunings, scores, and so on. The same applies to rock music and its successive fads and fashions: nothing reveals the differences between styles more clearly than the kind of equipment musicians use or the places in which they perform.

Material and spatial devices, collective arrangements, organised spaces and times, objects and instruments of various modes, and a wide range of techniques to deal with them: such a vision of taste as a performance undertaken through a procession of mediations perfectly fits the situated, equipped and collective definition of taste for food or love for music that we are trying to clarify. It is the opposite of the false image that the 'object versus sociology' controversy gives of it, that of a face-to-face challenge between Object and Subject; nothing of the kind when it comes to real debates among music- (or wine-)lovers.

The last leg of our stool is probably the one which poses most problems for sociology: the involvement of our body and soul in taste and artistic experiences and, more generally, the acknowledgement by any form of sociology of our sensations, feelings and emotions. Far from recognising this aspect of taste, the 'embodiment' track, over-frequented, takes the opposite direction, showing how our bodies are constructed through social devices and norms (see e.g. Featherstone et al. 1991). But the question here is not primarily about how a so-called natural body is in fact determined, tamed, performed and deformed by our social environment. Even more importantly, it is positively about the co-production of a loving body and a loved object through a collective and equipped activity. No tongue, no taste for wine, no nose without the whole wine-tasting process; no musical ear without music to hear. The body – or, more accurately, our 'body and soul' equipment – is (like the objects, collectives and devices of taste) a result emerging from the activity of tasting (Teil 1998), and not a given reality, not an autonomous and pre-existing physical body just needing a musical or gourmet training. Nor is it a psychological ability to enjoy organised sounds or elaborated products, of which the cognitive sciences are quick to give us a satisfying understanding. Our bodies and souls, like musical works and techniques, like the taste of wines or like amateurs' identities, are nothing but the means *and* the products of an uncertain, tentative, ongoing performance. Taste is precisely about managing this creative uncertainty: it is not about liking something from what we already know, but about changing our ability to like from the contact with a new thing, most often pre-presented by other amateurs who serve as mediators of one's own taste.

The provisional aim of our four-legged stool–scaffold, which we use more as a provisional minimalist *aide-mémoire* than as a meta-discourse, is to allow comparisons. Sports would direct our attention more towards the long-term training which can produce a new performing body, but no sport is possible either without objects – no pole vault without a bar – and this also means no

sport without records, contests, coaching, other performers, and a lot of techniques, both incorporated and objectified. The fact remains that, out of this common fourfold scheme (objects, collectives, devices, bodies), the case of sport shows more clearly the fact that there is no such thing as a given natural body. Only long training gives the performer the feeling of a *natural* act: he or she is taking possession of an incorporated collective ability. Think of this with wine-lovers or musicians in mind – and not only performers, but listeners too – and the weakness of the dual object–society model which overlooks bodies and material devices clearly appears. No music without the collective long-term production of hearing, of a specific listening, ranging from the more general frame of attention (paying attention to music *as* music) to the more local and specific habit of listening to tunes and works made available when and where we want by the record industry – a feature of music that the recording industry has developed but which existed from the early eighteenth century with the expansion of piano-making as an activity (Ehrlich 1976) and the publication of sheetmusic (Peacock and Weir 1975).

A pragmatic definition of the great amateur

An amateur always participates in the production of the product he or she likes, as does the reader. In literary theory, or even earlier, the reader as described by Proust in the Foreword to *Sésame et les Lys*, the French version of Ruskin's *Sesame and the Lilies*, is an actor of literature, made up of a set of positions 'not outside of the book, but inside it'. Taste appears in the end as both a fascinating, but also a very awkward and ambiguous, notion, hard to manipulate. Our argument is that it gains in interest if one refuses the common sense use of the word, as the mere activity of a taster face-to-face with a given object. Taste mobilises in a reflexive way a much larger conception of activity, bringing together the many facets of our relation to things: a corporal, affective and mental ability, but also a collective one; an ability induced by the products given to the attention of the taster, but also depending closely on material and technical devices of the performance of taste; and a variable, contingent and historical ability.

Being a great amateur, then, no longer means that one knows how to feel the quality of a wine or a music, and how to manage the context of the tasting situation or to use the right devices in order to get the best perception. It is not limited to a recording of the sequence of tastes or loved things, nor to the primacy of the search for pleasure. Rather, the amateur appears to be someone who selects, juxtaposes and co-ordinates ways of elaborating her or his taste. As a result, satisfaction and pleasure are no longer to be considered as direct consequences – necessarily felt by the subject – of the perfect fit between the properties of a product and the characteristics of a subject, even a social subject. Satisfaction, pleasure and emotion are objects of a reflexive questioning by the subject.

All the above points of view, which we contest, try to reduce the variety of judgements on quality to single point of reference defined by a theoretical

posture, a specific device or a situation aimed at showing the factors involved. But, most of the time, these theoretical postures appear to be irrelevant to the actors. The obsession with a rational, complete and coherent search for a localised cause in a determined part of the taste device is not to be found in the actors' practices. And all these points of view postulate taste as a result that imposes itself on the actors, in spite of themselves. Yet, these points of view describe the most common issues of debate through which amateurs reflexively elaborate their taste.

Instead of taking place on the outside, among rival disciplines, each fighting to give more importance to one aspect of their love (wines and works 'themselves', body and mind, the social game of participation and rejection, material, economic and technical devices, etc.), these debates should be returned to the real experts: the amateurs. They are the ones who perform the experiments and are forced to call themselves into question through the collective trial that any performance represents. In search of effects which are never guaranteed, they are the ones who draw on aesthetics, sociology, psychology, technology and economics, always needing to put their feelings into words collectively, in order to master, multiply and share those feelings.

Conclusion: the felicity of taste

Pragmaticians speak of the conditions of felicity of a sentence (e.g. Austin 1962): are not all the good reasons there for this type of analysis, making communication depend not only upon the properties of the enunciated or of the speakers' competences but also upon the situation of enunciation, especially relevant for taste? From an analysis centred on the perceptible effects of a product on a subject, one slides towards an analysis centred on the conditions allowing an effect to occur.

In the first case, when taking the effect as the 'enunciated', as the result to be explained, the entire methodological effort aims at inventing the right devices and experiments for distinguishing the outcome of purely musical or objective effects of a product on an isolated guinea-pig from biases stemming from the context, influences, or socio-cultural determinations (indirect effects helping or preventing good taste). In the second case, when taking the effect as the 'enunciation', as a co-producer of what happens, all these elements are there too: music and wines, diverse contexts, genres, formats of taste and various determinants. But their *a priori* distribution into distinct orders of reality (external causes, favourable conditions or obstacles, purely oenological or musical effects) and the modalities of their action are not known in advance; they are the 'constructive constraints' (see Gomart and Hennion 1999) on which taste relies and from which some effects occur or do not, without any amateur or analyst able to decide on or to master them.

Like those of Becker's 1963 marijuana smokers, effects occur only when expected, named, identified and collectively learnt, and when this long-term attention has allowed the production of products responding to this demand.

Taste is a performing activity: it succeeds only when it relies on its own results and effects, in a circular way, as long as it isolates, discusses and names them. One hears music only if one hears it *as* music. Then the question is not to isolate music or food, and to understand their *own* specific efficiency (or, conversely, in the case of sociologists, to deny it and make it a social rite or a game of identity and difference), but to give an account of the way wine or music has effects, arising out of a whole set of practices, bodies, collectives, all taken and taken again by the reflexive work of taste itself. Taste is an action, not a fact; it is an experience, not an object.

The shift is important. It has a crucial consequence, in particular, on methodology. As long as we acknowledge that the effects of a product, be it wine or music, have no reason to depend only on the product itself, nor only on the consumer's abilities, a crucial characteristic of taste becomes its reflexivity. And the analyst can only accompany amateurs, observing, seeing things arise, noticing changes, noting all the work of adjustment. She or he cannot simply objectify them without falling into one of the many strategies of the amateurs, strategies that they have already tested and which, most likely, they have already shown to be outdated.

Note

- 1 We have limited the number of citations in order to lighten the discussion. For more details see Teil 1998.

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