



Amidst all the distractions of modern living, one can still savor single notes of succulent taste.

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Distracted driving endangers everyone on the road, especially when others' distracted driving in turn distracts us. The sight of motorists texting while driving is frightening enough, and more so when viewed through our rearview mirrors. No less threatening is the distracted driver sipping from his Styrofoam cup of coffee. If he suddenly needed to grab hold of his steering wheel with both hands, he is not likely to relinquish grip on his steaming hot coffee and so more likely to rear end us. Yet traffic cops never ticket coffee drinkers for distracted driving. What about morning commuters noshing on donuts or bagels? Neither do the food police hand out tickets for distracted eating.

Radio Silence

Distractions to eating often begin right where we shop for food. Once past the entrance, shoppers typically step into the produce department. The dazzling array of shapes and colors of the fruits and vegetables presents a captivating visual feast that itself can whet our appetites. But in some supermarkets an electronic voice blares over the sound system

“Attention, shoppers!” to hawk a product or publicize a sale, which both distracts and detracts from the colorful display of lemon yellow lemons, green greens, and orange oranges. Pity those shoppers who themselves do the shouting – into their cellphones. Dividing their attentions, they deprive themselves of the sheer joy of shopping for produce, which allows us to indulge our tactile and visual senses without actually buying or eating the produce.

Once home with the groceries, soft background music played during a meal can be easily ignored but, if ignored, why even bother playing it? What a waste of music. Spoken word from a radio tells another story. Like the hawker in the supermarket, it cries out for attention, and especially when from a newscast whose news is mostly bad news. Similarly, when we talk at the dinner table we distract ourselves from the meal. Those who choose mindful eating over mindless banter do pay more attention to their meal. Monks of many disciplines eat in silence, but such monks usually commune with each other during the rest of the day outside of the dining rectory. The rest of us mere mortals who actually listen closely to what others say can find talking at the dinner table an even more enriching experience than eating. Thus it is

distracting, indeed insulting, to your dinner companions if you place your cellphone on the table because that means that you can't wait to interrupt their conversation.

Sharing food with family members is a sacrament. Sharing a meal with friends is a pleasure and a joy. But paying attention both to them and to the meal is a lot to pile onto one plate. So don't expect to pay much attention to the food because, rightfully so, the people with whom you dine should command all your attention. Similar distraction occurs when meat is included alongside the veggies, grains, nuts, seeds, or beans. The meat takes center stage because it still possesses some of the characteristics of an animal. Like the proverbial elephant in the room, a cow, a sheep, a pig, or a chicken, if alive and seated at your table surely would distract you from your meal. Thus some vegetarians get more distracted by an animal in dead mode placed atop their dinner companion's plate than by a cellphone in sleep mode placed next to that plate.

TV or Not TV

When dining alone, the solitary person instead of talking may resort to reading, even if only of the backs of breakfast cereal boxes. Reading while eating at least is conducted in relative silence. Even if you can never really hear yourself think, in a quiet place you can hear yourself chew. Libraries traditionally have been safe havens from both noise and food, but in a recent trend some college libraries not only allow food into the book stacks, but even encourage its consumption by opening cafés right inside their libraries. This promotes both distracted eating and distracted reading, and the distracted reading gets multiplied when the next patron opens a book to find its pages encrusted with the food left behind by the previous patron.

Reading books is one thing, watching TV is quite another. Some families decorate their homes with television sets in every room, including the dining room. Researchers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found that couch potatoes who ate while watching TV ate one-third more pizza and two-thirds more mac & cheese than while eating at the dinner table with the TV off. Another study of the eating habits of families with children weighed the people rather than their food. It found that those who ate in front of TVs were fatter than those who dined unplugged, surely a consequence both of too much eating and too much sitting. Researchers have not yet addressed the relation, if any, between binge watching and binge eating. Nor the correlation between the canned laughter beamed on TV airwaves and the canned food and TV dinners zapped in microwaves.

Salad Undressing

In nature, animals rarely eat more than one type of food at a time. When a hawk devours a squirrel or a rabbit, meat is not just the main course, but the only course. When a squirrel gnaws on acorns or beechnuts, nuts are its appetizer, entrée, and dessert. In nature, where all foods are natural foods, only those few edible plants that grow together get combined in the same meal. For most animals, mono meals are the rule. For humans, however, recipe-free mono foods are wrongly associated with monasticism and asceticism. Yet what recipe for guacamole can compare to the luscious simplicity of a perfectly ripe California Haas avocado? After imbibing in fried rice, rice pilaf, rice pudding, rice noodles, Rice Krispies, rice cakes, Rice-A-Roni, rice curry, Rice Chex, puffed rice, rice and beans, arroz con pollo, risotto, paella, dolma, sushi, maki, amazake, and saké, we are sure to find joy in the simple pleasure of a bowl of unadorned brown rice.

Variety is known to promote overeating. In a psychology study at the University of Oxford, test subjects ate much more when served three distinct flavors of yogurt (hazelnut, currant, and orange) than when served either three similar flavors (strawberry, raspberry, cherry) or just one, even if that one flavor was their favorite. A wide variety of flavors stimulates the appetite, while a simple or mono meal quiets desires and provides satiety sooner.

Same for complicated food combinations with a dozen ingredients. The choice is between savoring a dozen flavors all separately or just one flavor in a single recipe. Yet, most people deprive themselves by choosing the recipe. The next time you eat a meticulously built sandwich, take a bite out of it as served, but then drill down and eat it layer by layer. First the top bun or slice of bread; then the mayo or mustard; then the pickle or sprouts; then the mushrooms or onions; then the lettuce; then the cow cheese or nut cheese; then the burger or veggie burger. That's a total of seven singular taste sensations rather than just one. What's more, the first bite of any dish leaves the most indelible impression. The mouthfuls of the same dish that follow are relegated to becoming but aftertastes. No point in settling for enjoying just one first bite, when you can indulge in seven.

Same for salads. Try eating lettuce one leaf at a time. You may be surprised to learn that

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the outer leaf is sweet and tender, while the inner spine is tough and bitter. Then cozy up to an entire cucumber, peeled and sliced if you insist. Then consume a tomato, out of hand like an apple. Then sample a single radish, if you dare. Then a stalk or two of celery, deveined if you must. And finally, to clean your teeth, finish with a carrot stick if not an entire carrot. Eaten singly and whole, each veggie offers its own rewards. A fresh garden salad eaten veg by veg rejects the practice of adding salad dressing, which only distracts from the salad. Instead of smothering a salad with salad dressing, try preparing a salad undressing.

Chew on This

One thing and maybe the only thing about which all nutritionists agree is that we all need to thoroughly chew our food. “Chew your liquids and drink your solids,” sings the muse. Some nutritionists advocate counting at least ten chews per mouthful, others say twenty. But that is more about counting rather than about eating. Counting doesn’t count if instead you close your eyes while eating, which naturally slows down your chewing and your swallowing. (But don’t close your eyes until the food is actually in your mouth, because first looking at each forkful or spoonful enables you to fully appreciate each mouthful.) When you chew with your eyes closed, food will taste better, too.

What has changed? Not your food, not your taste buds, but only your undivided attention to the food. The philosophy of Schopenhauer posits the notion that, because we perceive the world through our senses, our senses shape the world that we perceive. The sense of taste is rallied by the combined forces of the tongue’s taste buds and the nose’s olfactory nerves. (Actually, also the eye’s optic nerve, because so often we eat with our eyes.) When you have a cold or if you hold your nose, you greatly diminish your sense of taste. Only a fool would intentionally hold his nose while eating, yet we essentially are thumbing our noses at our food when we pay scant attention to what we eat.

Rehab and Recovery

Among a host of dietary excesses, salt and sugar top the list. While most Americans add salt or sugar (or salt and sugar) to most foods, no one needs either. Both are highly refined white substances that detract from the real taste of real food and that can lead to substance abuse. We need to eat some carbs but not sugar, and some sodium but not salt.

More than enough of the mineral nutrient sodium is provided just from vegetables. In fact, people on very highly restrictive low-sodium diets are advised to avoid carrots, celery, spinach, chard, and certain sea vegetables. Salt, which inched into the human diet as a preservative primarily for meat, has been rendered obsolete by modern refrigeration. Yet the salt habit persists, and has subsequently raised blood pressures and dulled taste buds. Like an addiction, salt dependency is not easily kicked by going cold turkey but is more effectively weaned slowly and incrementally. For children raised in families that shook off the salt shaker, food prepared with any salt tastes too salty. Once you kick the salt habit, you will understand that salt distracts from the inherent, if subtle, flavors of all the foods that you’ve been slathering with salt. If your only

tool is a salt shaker, then the whole world tastes like salt.

In a similar fashion, piping hot or icy cold foods numb the taste buds. If you are curious to know how your favorite ice cream really tastes, just let it melt. If you allow food from the oven or the freezer to adjust to room temperature, you may be amazed to find that many familiar foods taste much more appetizing. Or disappointing! For instance, coffee and most teas, whether herbal or caffeinated, lose their appeal when tepid.

Whereas hot, cold, and salt all dull the taste buds, sugar overstimulates them. Both salt and sugar are pleasure traps. Douglas Lisle explains this principle in his book *The Pleasure Trap*. Junk food junkies can skip the book and watch his 17-minute TEDx lecture for the instant gratification of a video quick fix.

One Date at a Time

Once upon a time, a young king commanded his entourage of several wise men and wise women to write a single book on the science and fine art of food and nutrition. The wise ones retreated to the desert where they studied and labored to write that book. After much contemplation, they came to understand that good health is attained not just by nourishing the body but also by nurturing the soul, so they included in their treatise a chapter celebrating the benefits of strenuous exercise, moderate sunlight, fresh air, pure water, deep sleep, tranquil rest, periodic fasting, with a dash of yoga or meditation or prayer or chanting, and, lest we forget, reading and learning.

After ten years, they completed their writing and elected to send one lone wise woman among them to deliver their tome to the king. But during her solitary return journey, the wise woman realized that animals do not need to read to know what to eat, so if we’re so smart then why do humans? She decided to dispense with reading about eating, which puts us at risk of reading while eating. She deduced that we should eat simply, and when we eat we should do little else but eat. So rather than deliver the book to the king and thereby distract him with something to read, she shelved the book and arrived empty-handed.

The king greeted her return warmly and, expecting her to bestow upon him a book, he reached out his hand. Instead she placed into it a single date she had brought from the desert, a royal medjool date, fit for a king. The king cradled the date in his palm. Then, in slow succession, he inspected it, raised it to his mouth, and ate the date, chewing thoroughly, first consuming the skin, which was slightly bitter, then the flesh, which was exceedingly sweet. After licking bare the pit like a child sucking on hard candy, he saved it for later to plant and grow into a tree. For his first time, he understood the delicacy of a single date, and he recognized the potency of its single seed. At the same time, he was struck with an epiphany. He needed no book to teach him how or what to eat, but needed only to eat slowly and deliberately and without distraction, savoring one date at a time, one day at a time.

Mark Mathew Brauntin is the author of three books on food and nutrition, and contributes articles to many holistic health magazines, including three times previously to Spirit of Change. www.MarkBraunstein.org.