

The Taste Culture Reader

Experiencing Food and Drink

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 **BERG**
Oxford • New York

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The Breast of Aphrodite

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I grew up with the peach. It had a thin skin touched with fuzz, and a soft matte off-white color alternating with rosy hues. *Rodhákino* was its name (*ródho* means “rose”). It was well rounded and smooth like a small clay vase, fitting perfectly into your palm. Its interior was firm yet moist, offering a soft resistance to the teeth. A bit sweet and a bit sour, it exuded a distinct fragrance. This peach was known as “the breast of Aphrodite” (*o mastós tis Afrodhítis*).

A relation of this peach appeared eventually in the markets, which was called *yermás*. It was a much softer, watery fruit with a yolkish yellow color and reddish patches. Its silky thin skin would slide off at a touch revealing its slippery, shiny, deep yellow interior that melted with no resistance in the mouth. Both fruits were very sensitive, easy to bruise. I learned to like them both but my heart was set for the *rodhákino*.

In the United States, all fruits resembling either the *rodhákino* or *yermás* are named “peach.” Throughout my years in the States, the memory of my peach was in its difference.

Every journey back was marked by its taste. Summer was its permanent referent, yet its gradual disappearance from the summer markets passed almost unnoticed. A few years ago, I realized that the peach was nowhere to be found in the markets, in or outside of Athens. When I mentioned it in casual conversations to friends and relatives, they responded as if the peach was always out there although they had not happened to eat it lately. What they were mainly buying, they explained, was a kind of *yermadho-rodhákino* (a blend of *yermás* and *rodhákino*). People only alluded to the disappearance of the older peach by remarking on the tastelessness of new varieties, a comment that was often extended to all food: “Nothing tastes as good as the past.”

As my search for the peach became more persistent, my disappointment matched their surprise in the realization that the peach was gone forever.

I asked my father to plant it in our fields in the country to rescue it, but he has yet to find it. My older friends began to bring me tokens from their neighborhood markets, as well as from the country whenever they traveled out of the city. We all agreed that there were varieties that carried one or two of the characteristics of "our peach" but they were far from it. The part had taken the name of the whole.

In the presence of all those "peaches," the absent peach became narrative. It was as if when something leaves, it only goes externally, for its body persists within persons. The peach was its memory, and as if both had gone underground, they waited to be named. My naming of its absence resurrected observations, commentaries, stories, some of which encapsulated whole epochs marked by their own sensibilities. "Ah, that peach, what an aroma! and taste! The breast of Aphrodite we called it. These (peaches and other food) today have no taste (*á-nosta*)."

The younger generation, whenever present, heard these stories as if listening to a captivating fairy tale. For me the peach had been both eaten and remembered, but for the younger generation it was now digested through memory and language. At the same time, we are all experiencing the introduction from foreign markets of new fruits with no Greek precedents, such as the kiwi. For the younger generation, the remembered first peach exists on the same exotic plane as the kiwi. For the generation that follows, the kiwi, no longer exotic, may evoke a different sensibility.

The disappearance of Aphrodite's peach is a double absence; it reveals the extent to which the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence. That first peach of my childhood carried with it allusions to distant epochs where the relation between food and the erotic was perhaps more explicit, named, and sacralized; a relation that although fragmented and gone underground, was carried over through the centuries by the *rodhákino*, a fruit bearing myth in its form.

The new fruits displaced the *rodhákino* and together with it, a mosaic of enmeshed memories, tastes, aromas. The surrogate remains as a simulation with no model, emptied of specific cultural content and actively producing forgetfulness. A shift has been accomplished from sedimented depth to surface with no past. Aphrodite's peach in its presence and later absence materialized experiences of time which are searched for fruitlessly in the peach of today. This complicity of history and the senses also refers to the relation between *Eros* and *Thanatos* where the latter is not mere absence or void but rather material closure, a cordoning off of the capacity for certain perceptual experiences in such a manner that their very disappearance goes unnoticed.

How are the transformations of the senses experienced and conceptualized? This is also to ask, how is history experienced and thought of, on the level of the everyday? What elements in a culture enable the sensory experience of history? Where can historicity be found? In what sensory forms and

practices? And to what extent is the experience of and the capacity to narrate history tied to the senses? Is memory stored in specific everyday items that form the historicity of a culture, items that create and sustain our relationship to the historical as a sensory dimension?

Is the disappearance of Aphrodite's peach an idiosyncratic event? Or does the disappearance of the "particular" peach as micro-history materialize on the everyday sweeping, macro-historical, sociocultural changes? The vanishing of tastes, aromas, and textures is being writ large in contemporary European margins with the joint expansion and centralization of EEC market rationalities. The erasure of one Greek peach poses the question: At what experiential levels are the economic and social transformations of the EEC being felt? Under the rationale of transnational uniformity the EEC may have initiated a massive intervention in the commensal cultures of its membership by determining what regional varieties of basic food staples can be grown, marketed, and exported. Certain types of Irish potatoes, German beer, and French cheese are no longer admissible into the public market, no longer eligible for subsidies because they look, appear, and taste different, and in some cases violate new health regulations.

In Greece, as regional products gradually disappear, they are replaced by foreign foods, foreign tastes; the universal and rationalized is now imported into the European periphery as the exotic. Here a regional diversity is substituted by a surplus over-production. This EEC project implicitly constitutes a massive resocialization of existing consumer cultures and sensibilities, as well as a reorganization of public memory. A French cheese is excluded because it is produced through a specific fermentation process, one that market regulations deem a health risk. What is fermentation if not history? If not a maturation that occurs through the articulation of time and substance? Sensory premises, memories and histories are being pulled out from under entire regional cultures and the capacity to reproduce social identities may be altered as a result. Such economic processes reveal the extent to which the ability to replicate cultural identity is a material practice embedded in the reciprocities, aesthetics, and sensory strata of material objects. Sensory displacement does not only relate to cultures of consumption but to those local material cultures of production where the latter is still symbolically mediated and not yet reduced to a purely instrumental practice. Sensory changes occur microscopically through everyday accretion; so, that which shifts the material culture of perception is itself imperceptible and only reappears after the fact in fairy tales, myths, and memories that hover at the margins of speech.

The imperceptible is not only the consequence of sensory transformation but also the means by which it takes place. Thus the problematic of the senses in modernity resurrects the old theme ignored in recent anthropological theory, that of the historical unconscious.

The Impeachment of Nostalgia

The memory of Aphrodite's peach is nostalgic. What is the relation of nostalgia to the senses and history? In English the word "nostalgia" (in Greek *nostalghía*) implies trivializing romantic sentimentality. In Greek the verb *nostalghó* is a composite of *nóstó* and *alghó*. *Nóstó* means "I return," "I travel" (back to homeland); the noun *nóstos* means "the return," "the journey," while *á-nostos* means "without taste," as the new peaches are described (*ánosta*, in plural). The opposite of *ánostos* is *nóstimos* and characterizes someone or something that has journeyed and arrived, has matured, ripened and is thus tasty (and useful). *Alghó* means "I feel pain," "I ache for," and the noun *álghos* characterizes one's pain in soul and body, burning pain (*kaimós*). Thus *nostalghía* is the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It also evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening. In this sense, *nostalghía* is linked to the personal consequences of historicizing sensory experience which is conceived as a painful bodily and emotional journey.

Nostalghía thus is far from trivializing romantic sentimentality. This reduction of the term confines the past and removes it from any transactional and material relation to the present; the past becomes an isolatable and consumable unit of time. Nostalgia, in the American sense, freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present, preventing the present from establishing a dynamic perceptual relationship to its history. Whereas the Greek etymology evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience.¹ Does the difference between nostalgia and *nostalghía* speak of different cultural experiences of the senses and memory? Could a dialogical encounter of the terms offer insights for an anthropology of the senses?

Sensory Exchange and Performance

Nostalghía speaks to the sensory reception of history. In Greek there is a semantic circuit that weds the sensorial to agency, memory, finitude, and therefore history—all of which are contained within the etymological strata of the senses. The word for senses is *aesthísis*; emotion-feeling and aesthetics are respectively *aésthima* and *aesthítikí*. They all derive from the verb *aesthánome* or *aesthísome* meaning I feel or sense, I understand, grasp, learn, or receive news or information, and I have an accurate sense of good and evil, that is I judge correctly. *Aesthísis* is defined as action or power through the medium of the senses, and the media or the *semía* (points, tracks, marks) by which one senses. *Aésthima*, emotion-feeling, is also an ailment of the soul, an event that happens, that impacts on one viscerally through the senses; it also refers to romance, or love affair. A strong *aésthima* is called *páthos*

(passion). This includes the sense of suffering, illness, but also the English sense of passion, as in he has a passion for music. The stem verb *pathéno* means I provoke passion in both its meanings; I am acting, moving by an internal forceful *aésthima*, passion; I get inspired, excited; I suffer. Among Greek youth the word *pathéno* as in "When I hear this song *pathéno*," is common. The gestures accompanying it, such as hitting and holding the forehead, and the matching sounds, express both (sudden) suffering and extreme enjoyment.

A synonym of *pathéno* in this case is *pethéno*, I die. *Páthos* (passion) is the meeting point of *éros* and *thánatos*; where the latter is an internal death, the death of the self because of and for the other; the moment that the self is both the self and a memory in the other. Death is a journey; a sensorial journey into the other. So is *éros*. The common expression during lovemaking is *Me péthanes* (You made me die, I died because of, for you and through you). *Éros* is desire. It also means appetite. The expression often used in vernacular Greek, e.g. from mother to child, to show extreme desire is: "I'll eat you." The same expression is used for someone causing suffering, e.g. child to parent, "You ate me." In the journey of death, to the other world, the earth "eats" the body.

In these semantic currents we find no clear-cut boundaries between the senses and emotions, the mind and body, pleasure and pain, the voluntary and the involuntary, and affective and aesthetic experience. Such culturally specific perspectives on sensory experience are not sheer comparative curiosities. They are crucial for opening up a self-reflexive, culturally and historically informed consideration of the senses. Sensory semantics in Greek culture, among others, contain regional epistemologies, inbuilt theories, that provoke important cross-cultural methodological consequences...

Sour Grapes

Not only have some foreign fruits arrived in Greek markets—it is no coincidence that in colloquial Greek a strange or weird person is referred to as "a strange fruit" or "a new fruit"—but also familiar fruits have made their timid appearance in fancy supermarkets at the "wrong season." For instance grapes, emblematic of the summer for Greeks, have appeared in the winter under the sign "imported from EEC." Observing local women shopping, touching, picking, and choosing, one notices that they pass them over as if they never notice them, or comment on how sour they look. Sour implies not yet ripened, thus not in season, and so tasteless (*ánosta*). And while the EEC in this case becomes identified with sour grapes, a whole epoch, the present, is characterized as *ánosto*.

When and how does an epoch, a slice of history, become something *ánosto*? To say that aspects of daily life have become tasteless, to make parts substitute for the whole, implies that the capacity to synthesize perceptual

experience is only accessible through dispersed fragments. The movement from real or imagined wholes to parts and fragments is a metaphorical slide that captures the movement of history through a shifting perceptual focus. The capacity to replicate a sensorial culture resides in a dynamic interaction between perception, memory, and a landscape of artifacts, organic and inorganic. This capacity can atrophy when that landscape, as a repository and horizon of historical experience, emotions, embedded sensibilities, and hence social identities, dissolves into disconnected pieces. At the same time, what replaces it?

When new forms and items of an emerging material culture step in between a society's present perceptual existence and its residual socio-cultural identity, they can be tasteless because people may no longer have the perceptual means for seeking identity and experience in new material forms. Because the cultural instruments for creating meaning out of material experience have been dispersed with the now discarded past sensory landscape. The latter was didactic as much as it was an object of perception and utility. The characterization *ánosto* (tasteless) then deals with the cultural incapacity to codify past, present, and anticipatory experiences at the level of sensory existence. This is so because such codifying practices are never purely mentalist but embedded in and borne by a material world of talking objects.

This is why the enthusiastic reception of the "new" is imported, culturally prepared, and programmed with the simultaneous fabrication or promise of new sensory powers—the latter are automatically bonded with the items of the penetrating culture. Thus each commodity form is introduced through the creation of its own self-generating experience and memory. The latter are themselves promised as substitutions, replacements, and improvements of prior sensory experience.

In cultures that undergo colonial and post-colonial experiences of transformation, the experience of tastlessness can be self-imposed, for they have internalized "the eye of the Other" (Seremetakis 1984) and see their own culture and residual experience from a position of defamiliarization and estrangement. This can result in a newly constructed archaization of recent and unreconcilable experiences, practices, and narratives. Particular and now idiosyncratic cultural experiences are described as having long disappeared, as lost, when in fact they are quite recent and their memory sharp. As one moves deeper into conversation with people, their intimacy with these distant practices comes out as fairy tales, anecdotes, folklore, and myth. The historical repression of memory that the cultural periphery can impose on itself is as rapid, shallow, profound, and experientially painful as any other disorienting penetration of metropolitan modernity. The discourse on loss is an element of public culture, an official ideological stance taken toward the past that aligns the speaker with the normative view of the present, i.e. modern times. Yet as the discourse of loss congeals into an element of public

culture, that which has never been lost, but which can no longer be said, shared, and exchanged, becomes the content of unreconciled personal and privatized experience...

Mnemonic sensory experience implies that the artifact bears within it layered commensal meanings (shared substance and material reciprocities) and histories. It can also be an instrument for mobilizing the perceptual penetration of historical matter. As a sensory form in itself, the artifact can provoke the emergence, the awakening of the layered memories, and thus the senses contained within it. The object invested with sensory memory speaks; it provokes recall as a missing, detached yet antiphonic element of the perceiver. The sensory connection between perceiver and artifact completes the latter in an unexpected and nonprescribed fashion because the perceiver is also the recipient of the unintended historical aftereffects of the artifact's presence or absence.

Note

1. To conduct an etymological analysis of a term or concept is not to assume that all the sediments of meaning are operant at all times and with a uniform prevalence. However, etymological analysis is complementary to the uneven historical development of European peripheries which is characterized by the incomplete and disjunctive articulation of the pre-modern, different phases within modernity, and the postmodern. Etymology captures the uneven shifts of semantic history that may be present at any given moment in a society.

Reference

Seremetakis, C. Nadia (1984), "The eye of the other; watching death in rural Greece," *Journal of Modern Hellenism* Vol. 1 (1): 63–77.