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## A MATTER OF TASTE

*Adam Price. Screenwriter. Food critic and food columnist from the danish paper Politiken. Tv-chef for National Danish Television.*

I would like to talk to you today about taste. As a food critic I am – so to speak – a professional judge of taste – at least regarding restaurants and food. A strange thing in it self. For when it comes to food – we generally like to use the expression: it is matter of taste. We say that when we want to express, that "I personally liked og disliked this – but others may think of it otherwise."

Eating is actually a very sensual experience – in the very essence of the word. Everytime we eat - We use ALL of our senses:

Sight – we look at what we eat

Sound – we hear what we eat...

Touch – we ouch our food – we sense temperature and texture

Smell – we smell our food.

And finally :Taste.

We could also say, that eating involves a sixth sense: the sense of aesthetics or emotion. The sensation of experiencing the pleasure of – hopefully – good food.

What other daily, repeated action do we take, that involve ALL of our senses?

And more importantly – we could then ask:

Why is eating often such a sense-less experience?

Personally I believe we have lost track of 2 major things:

Time & Place

I'll return to this several times as I move on. But I want to stress an important point first in order to avoid any misunderstandings: I talk to you today as a consumer. As one who is your customer anywhere it may be: mass catering, large public kitchens such as hospitals, school canteens, work-place cafeterias, ferries, airplanes etc. I want only one thing: to eat as well as possible. I want the best possible quality my money can buy.

To be completely honest: mass catering, large canteens and public kitchens generally do not have the very best gastronomical reputation in Denmark. Perhaps this doesn't restrict itself to Denmark. We generally do not expect to eat very well when we are on an airplane or on a ferry. I have personally reviewed hospital kitchens in Denmark. In most cases, I must admit, I was not very impressed. I have tried public catering for old people in Denmark: this was actually beyond the standard definitions of good or bad. It was close to criminal.

At my paper – Politiken - we give the restaurants from 1 to 6 chefs Hats. Other papers give stars – or knives and forks. But we give chefs hats. When I professionally - as a food critic - believe that something is "a matter of taste" – it generally means that I will add or subtract 1 hat. One unit – so to speak.

When we take away more than that – it is no longer "a matter of taste". As a food critic, I look for mistakes, errors made in the kitchen. That the food was bad. That the timing was bad. That the service was bad.

I would love if the products that I come across from large kitchens, mass catering etc. generally could fall under the term: a matter of taste. Usually it can't.

For example. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could hear a conversation like this on an airplane – when the food had just been served:

*What a wonderful lamb stew. Is that rosemary, they have seasoned it with?*

*Yes it must be.*

*And a very nice ratatouille too*

*Yes – a bit on the sweet side, though...*

*You think so? Well I guess it is a matter of taste...*

The problem is – that we hardly EVER hear a conversation like that. The conversation usually goes like this:

*Oh my God.. what is this? That white stuff – is that a kind of sauce?*

*No – It looks like cheese...*

*What is it?*

*I dont know... i dont think I'm going to try it...*

*Just eat the bread. Then youre safe...*

This is what we expect – when we eat in airplanes. It is almost a universal fact. It is the way it is supposed to be. It is not something we can change. Well – perhaps. But as a food critic, I cannot help feeling provoked by that fact. In Copenhagen airport alone we have 21 million travellers a year. That is 21 million potentially terrible meals being served. Should we just accept this? Well not all of us are willing to do so:

Six months ago – a man boarded a virgin airlines flight from india to the uk. It was an ordinary flight – and the man was served an ordinary dinner on the plane. It was of course very bad – as it always is.

But this man got angry. No – not angry. He got pissed. He refused to accept that this was the way it was supposed to be. He took pictures of the food. He complained in a letter. Not to his travelagent. Not to the steward aboard the virgin flight. Not to the person responsible for food and beverages at virgin. No. He wrote a letter to the person responsible for...virgin arilines. Sir Richard Branson.

Now I'm sure, that some of you might have come across this letter, which is now famous. It has been published in several papers – and distributed over the internet. But still I'll read some of it for you.

*REF: Mumbai to Heathrow 7th December 2008*

*I love the Virgin brand, I really do which is why I continue to use it despite a series of unfortunate incidents over the last few years. This latest incident takes the biscuit.*

*Ironically, by the end of the flight I would have gladly paid over a thousand rupees for a single biscuit following the culinary journey of hell I was subjected to at the hands of your corporation.*

*Look at this Richard. Just look at it: [see image 1, above].*

*I imagine the same questions are racing through your brilliant mind as were racing through mine on that fateful day. What is this? Why have I been given it? What have I done to deserve this? And, which one is the starter, which one is the dessert?*

*You don't get to a position like yours Richard with anything less than a generous sprinkling of observational power so I KNOW you will have spotted the tomato next to the two yellow shafts of sponge on the left. Yes, it's next to the sponge shaft without the green paste. That's got to be the clue hasn't it. No sane person would serve a dessert with a tomato would they. Well answer me this Richard, what sort of animal would serve a dessert with peas in: [see image 2, above].*

*I know it looks like a baaji but it's in custard Richard, custard. It must be the pudding. Well you'll be fascinated to hear that it wasn't custard. It was a sour gel with a clear oil on top. It's only redeeming feature was that it managed to be so alien to my palette that it took away the taste of the curry emanating from our miscellaneous central cuboid of beige matter. Perhaps the meal on the left might be the desert after all.*

*Anyway, this is all irrelevant at the moment. I was raised strictly but neatly by my parents and if they knew I had started desert before the main course, a sponge shaft would be the least of my worries. So lets peel back the tin-foil on the main dish and see what's on offer.*

*I'll try and explain how this felt. Imagine being a twelve year old boy Richard. Now imagine it's Christmas morning and you're sat there with your final present to open. It's a big one, and you know what it is. It's that Goodmans stereo you picked out the catalogue and wrote to Santa about.*

*Only you open the present and it's not in there. It's your hamster Richard. It's your hamster in the box and it's not breathing. That's how I felt when I peeled back the foil and saw this: [see image 3, above].*

*Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's more of that Baaji custard. I admit I thought the same too, but no. It's mustard Richard.*

*MUSTARD. More mustard than any man could consume in a month. On the left we have a piece of broccoli and some peppers in a brown glue-like oil and on the right the chef had prepared some mashed potato. The potato masher had obviously broken and so it was decided the next best thing would be to pass the potatoes through the digestive tract of a bird.*

*Once it was regurgitated it was clearly then blended and mixed with a bit of mustard. Everybody likes a bit of mustard Richard.*

*By now I was actually starting to feel a little hypoglycaemic. I needed a sugar hit. Luckily there was a small cookie provided. It had caught my eye earlier due to it's baffling presentation: [see image 4, above].*

*It appears to be in an evidence bag from the scene of a crime. A CRIME AGAINST BLOODY COOKING. Either that or some sort of back-street underground cookie, purchased off a gun-toting maniac high on his own supply of yeast. You certainly wouldn't want to be caught carrying one of these through customs. Imagine biting into a piece of brass Richard. That would be softer on the teeth than the specimen above.*

*So that was that Richard. I didn't eat a bloody thing. My only question is: How can you live like this? I can't imagine what dinner round your house is like, it must be like something out of a nature documentary.*

Well – this is all very funny. It underlines the fact, that the funniest things in the world are usually written by angry, frustrated people. The good thing is that Richard Branson actually acted on this complaint. He has now invited the man to join the taste-panel that is going to try the new menus on Virgin Airlines. I don't know if it is going to change anything. But it is kind of a happy ending to a story, that is being told every day, thousands of times around the world: Food on airplanes is terrible – and there is nothing we can do to change it.

Generally I believe, that our willingness as consumers to accept poor quality and do nothing about it – is just as big a problem, as the poor quality it self. I mean: the only reason there are som many horrible frozen pizzas and disgusting ready-made meals in the supermarket – is because people actually buy them and eat them.

And when I look at myself in the mirror – I must admit, that even I – who is a professional food critic – has the tendency to forgive and forget. Or to feel that this is too big a mountain to move. I'll give you an example:

I eat almost every day in a large restaurant or cafeteria in the danish broadcasting company. The largest television-station in Denmark. Off course It has a restaurant and a café for the people working there.

People that are creative, people that are demanding and who have seen the world. Still the Danish Broadcasting Company decided to give the challenge of catering these thousands of critical journalists and creative people to... a cleaning company. The same company that cleans the buildings. Of course this makes sence on a company level. Outsourcing both fields to a single company definitely cuts expenses. But as a consumer I find it somewhat hard to accept the logic that a company who is great at cleaning 500 toilets in half an hour can also cook.

A few weeks ago, I went to the restaurant with a few colleagues.

A large sign said: Todays special - Steak Sandwich.

Now I LOVE steak sandwich. I'm sure some of or all of you know the wonderful taste of a grilled or fried steak, cut into nice chunks and placed on good, toasted bread with fried onions, relishes, mayonnaise etc.

A man was standing at the counter. I asked him: how do you make your steak sandwich? He answered sure of himself: the way it is supposed to be made. I ordered one immediately. The next few minutes I saw – with growing fear and

desperation - how he completely destroyed everything that is good and wonderful about that beautiful creation: the steak sandwich.

He took some meat – that looked like porc – although it might have been some kind of molested beef. He threw it on a pan, that wasn't warm. Now we all know what happens, if we throw meat on a lukewarm pan: it doesn't fry. It begins to boil. He didn't know and he didn't care. Then he took a big, soft, muffin-like bun, cut it in half and threw in a handful of salad without any dressing. Then he was overtaken by complete madness and poured a cup of cream over the grey, boiling meat in the pan. He scraped the meat and the cream over the bun and the salad – both of which instantly became soggy with that pathetic excuse for a cream sauce. Then he served it. I stared at the creation with pure horror. But what did I do? I paid. I sat down with my colleagues and ate two or three mouthfuls of that hellish thing. This was beyond "a matter of taste". It was simply disgusting. I sat there and said terrible things about the Danish broadcasting company. And then I went back to my computer and continued working for them. I didn't write a complaint. I didn't ask for a meeting with my boss. I didn't try to organize a revolt.

So when I read the story of the angry passenger on Virgin Airlines – I was actually inspired. I thought: yes! We shouldn't accept things the way that they are.

He reminded me of another brave man I met briefly in a cafeteria aboard a train travelling through Germany when I was a child on holiday with my parents. We had had a terrible dinner and my father had made a long speech about how the quality of train-restaurants had deteriorated in the 20th century. Then the waiter went and collected the plates and asked in German: Na' hats geschmächt? (Was it tasty) And suddenly I saw my father – who wasn't a shy person – just nodded and said nothing. He didn't bother. Next to us a man was sitting with his family. When the waiter asked them the same question he sat quiet for a moment and then suddenly said: wollen Sie meine Meinung haben? Grausam. (If you want my opinion: it was absolutely horrible)

He instantly became a hero in the restaurant – because he actually said what was right – and didn't just sit there, doing nothing.

The same kind of attitude towards food that we usually meet on airplanes – we can meet in numerous other places. But it is usually in combination with one very important fact: **lack of choice**. We can't go to another restaurant flying 10 kilometers over the Indian Ocean, or on a ferry or on a train. Nor can I personally take an hour out of our workday and find a decent restaurant that doesn't serve a steak sandwich like the one I got at my work. Nor can patients in hospitals or old people in nursing homes.

12 years ago my mother was admitted to a hospital with cancer. When my brother and I tasted the food, we immediately decided to cook all her food ourselves. The hospital-food was not going to be the cause of death – we insisted. There is an old phrase that goes: "you have to have a really good health to go to the hospital."

It turned out to be true in those years. I didn't know it was that bad. But it was – back then anyway. Years later, as a food critic, I tested hospital food around Copenhagen. I thought the result was given already: the food would be terrible. It was – the first couple of places I went anyway. But then I was surprised: at one hospital in the suburbs of Copenhagen – food was actually all right. I asked what had happened. It was a test period. A well-known chef from the restaurant-business had been given the task of making the food better – but still maintaining the budget. He had actually managed to introduce some fresh vegetables and cooking-techniques that didn't deliberately destroy all texture and taste in food. The patients were happier. The doctors and nurses were happier – and the people in the kitchen were beginning to feel proud of the food – all though one of the nurses told me, that "this would probably only be a passing phase – and that everything will go back to the old standard in a few months". Well – I'll get back to that a little later...

But writing about that one good experience I tried to find out: what was the difference – when I compared the experience with the other hospitals. I came

to the conclusion, that usually when food is really bad – it denies time and place. I'll try to explain – because there is a historical perspective:

The culture of food has very much been developed by the kitchens – the cuisine of the princes and kings throughout history.

Kings want to show off power and wealth. So it quickly became high fashion to get the ingredients as far away as possible. Spices from other side of the earth. Rare animals and exotic fruits.

This was adopted by the aristocracy in the large cities – the bourgeoisie. And later on this entered the consumer-culture in the western world. We want **availability** more than anything else. Strawberries all year round. All vegetables all year round. Everything all year round and round the clock. Because at the same time as this actually became possible, another revolution took place: the liberation of women. Women went to work, kids went to kindergartens – and we forgot a lot of skills that we now have to go to our grandmothers to learn. How to cook properly.

When I talk to some of the old chefs about the restaurant-business, they see some problems, that are connected with this historical development. Some young chefs have never worked with a whole animal. They are only used to work with fillets and ready-to-use-cuts – from fish, poultry or beef. This is a development I personally think we need to be aware of and change – when it comes to trained professionals in the professional kitchen. They should be the torch-bearers for the rest of us. I believe their knowledge of the old, basic skills should be the foundation of their craft.

As a restaurant critic – the most boring thing for me is a so called International Kitchen or cuisine. What is that? It is food without a home. It is food you can find anywhere. You usually get this experience in hotel-restaurants. Suddenly the "continental breakfast" or the lunch-buffet makes you wonder: Where am I? Norway? Spain? United States? Australia? International food tastes of the same – everywhere you eat it. It is the taste of indifference. And the problem is the same: Time and place.

When you ask a good chef – what is your favorite food – he cannot say. Because: He loves the new green peas in spring, strawberries in summer, apples in fall, the heavy stews of winter cooking. Also a good chef usually shapes his or her love of food from childhood memories and the knowledge of the regional products from his country.

If we use too many cans, powders, frozen vegetables in our cooking – we deny all this. We tell a lie. We tell our customers, that there is no such thing as seasons. That there is no such thing as local produce. We can get everything – when we want. That is the same as saying: time is standing still. Also - there is also nothing to look forward to. Everything is the same – always. If I can get strawberries all the year – then I don't look forward to midsummer – when the real, ripe strawberries arrive. Berries that are not ripened aboard a ship – but in the fields by the sun.

I went to Portugal a few weeks ago. I had a somewhat disturbing experience: We went to the supermarket – and found out that the supermarket was german. Fine. No problem. But All the vegetables were either from Holland or Spain. The meat was german or polish. Now I'm all for the european union and free trade – but I'm also somewhat conscious of the environment. And I wondered: why am I sitting in beautiful, sunny Portugal – and eating dull, dutch vegetables, that have been transported 1500 miles in a truck? It was litterary an experience like the "international kitchen" – now just in the field of consumer goods.

Fortunately there is a new mindset evolving these years. Earlier today I understand that you heard about the Nordic Kitchen. The principles of this are so obvious – that you wonder why nobody thought of this in the nordic countries before now. It is of course the principles of delving into local produce, our own traditions – and the changing of seasons. It is funny to think, that the knowledge of our grandmothers – the knowledge of old traditions in the kitchen, dishes, seasons, fruit, meat and vegetables – are now the backbone of michelin star-restaurants.

Many of you have heard about Noma – the famous danish restaurant with 2 michelin stars that was recently awarded the number 3 best restaurant in the world. Noma is also regarded as the main restaurant representing the nordic kitchen in the world. And when you talk to the head chef, Rene Redzepi – say in the end of february – he is usually getting desperate. He is longing for spring. Because he almost can't think of any more dishes to make with the winter-ingredients he has been working with solely from end of october. In Noma they only use produce from the nordic countries – and in february there is not much left. But this is the way it is *supposed to be* – in february in Denmark. Then you make do with what you've got. And this way of limiting your own possibilities as a chef has done wonders for the innovation and creativity – and made the restaurant world famous.

I'll like to tell you a happy case-story – inspired by the same thoughts. 5 years ago i worked as a tv-executive and went to a seminar in a famous hotel 75 km west of here. The hotel is in an old castle – and it is called Dragsholm. We were going to have a medieval-menu the program said. Well – lets just say, that the only medieval thing that night was the service. The food was a mess. The next day for lunch it was the most boring edition of the "international kitchen" from beginning to end. We were far beyond "a matter of taste". It was just plain bad. The employees we frustrated, the economy was bad, the place was worn down.

Then new owners came to the castle. They looked out of the window and found out, that the nereby farmers actually grew vegetables. They discovered that the vegetables from the local farmers tasted better than the canned and frozen vegetables they had been using for years at the place. They threw away the can- opener. They delved into the history of the castle – and found out that the fields surrounding the castle for miles and miles actually were the place where some of the best vegetables in Denmark are grown. AND that it was one of the old Barons of the castle, who actually started the production of vegetables in that part of the country. This inspired the new chef to design a new cuisine for the castle – based on the nordic kitchen – and local produce.

I would like to show you some pictures of the food they serve in the restaurant now. Almost everything you see is grown within 2 miles of the castle kitchen.

The point is – that they found a new way to cook and a new way to **think food** by delving into their own history and surroundings. By working closely with the local farmers. They suddenly found out, that it was also a good story – and it was something the customers loved to hear about. "I'm proud of serving this carrot – because I know the man who grows it. It know the amount of work he pours into it." The castle is now one of the 10-15 best restaurants in Denmark – and the place is bustling with initiative and pride.

I know of course that this is a success-story from the world of gourmet-restaurants. I know that the quality of large kitchens and mass catering is not saved by looking out of the window and "talking to the local farmers". But changing the way we think – is the first important step. Not giving up. Not to say: we'll do it as it has always been done. Could we do this with fresh ingredients? Look at what you buy and at your menus. How much of the daily work is constructed from old habits and conventions of the profession? Quality comes first of all from the minds of people that want to make a difference. It also comes from money, I know – so we need to make our politicians and bosses understand, that taste matters – and that this is not a matter of taste.

I personally need to be brave enough to go to my boss and say: how dare you serve a steak sandwich on a soggy muffin and expect me to do my best?

In many cases I think we need to go back to the basics. We are very much influenced by conventions, bad habits – and sentences like: this is the way it has to be done. This is what the customers want. I tried some school meals a few years ago. Terrible food. Nothing but fat and carbohydrates. And the poorest quality you could imagine. I was told: this is what the kids want. What can we do? It is the same thing as saying: my kid wants to scream and hit people all the time – what can I do? You are his parent, for crying out loud.

Teach him otherwise. We have to insist on an alternative. If we insist on better food – we will get better food.

Speaking of food during transportation – by the way: the best food I've ever eaten on a train was in Turkey – about 8 years. Going from Istanbul to Konya with the Night Train. The modern world had yet to reach Turkish train-catering – and thank God for that. Therefore – they had not told themselves: it is too difficult to make food on a train. Everything has to be microwaved. So the chef just made food on the train-stove the way he would cook in a restaurant. The result: plain, good ol', honest food. Could we learn from that? Actually I think we could. Sometimes we could ask ourselves: is this the way it is supposed to be – or have we surrounded ourselves with systems, that only serve a cost-friendly, corporate and "efficient" purpose? A famous British chef, Marco Pierre-White once said: At the end of the day, it's just food. That quote became quite famous. It was actually said to cut through all the fuss about gourmet-cooking. But I think we could use it the other way around. To try to remind ourselves of ***what cooking is actually about***. When we feel alienated by bad habits and products from a food industry with no conscience. What do we want? At the end of the day – it's just food, that we want. Good, honest, plain food. Perhaps we should try to keep it that way.

Is there hope? I think there is. I truly believe we are changing our mindset on important areas these years. Remember the hospital I told you about – where they feared that the good food was only a passing phase? My wife gave birth to our son in the same hospital last summer. After he was born – I went out completely confused – with tears of joy running down my eyes – to find some food for my wife and I. We sat there and ate hungrily – and suddenly looked up from our plates at the same time – surprised. This is actually good – my wife said. This is actually quite good. It was. And I promise you: it was not a matter of taste...

***Adam Price***