

# Discovering Quality or Performing Taste? A Sociology of the Amateur

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## Abstract

Based on comparative ethnographic observations of wine, food and music lovers, the paper, after reviewing the sociology of eating and taste, proposes an analytic grid in order to give an account of taste as a collective performance and an on-going process, instead of treating it as a passive consequence of the things tasted and an accumulation of competences and preferences inside the amateur ("discovering quality").

Four central elements have been identified, on which taste as an activity relies:

- the object tasted
- a collective of tasters ("amateurs" or not)
- material and technical devices.
- and the taster's "body and soul"

The crucial argument is not in the list itself, but in the reflexive and performative status of each of those elements. None of them can be taken as an external determination of taste. Being both results and sources of taste, they emerge along with the performance, as productive constraints which amateurs themselves continuously discuss, test and elaborate. Bodies, spaces, durations, devices, objects, tools, instruments: the love of music or wine is an activity, not only the acknowledgment of social identities or a collective rite reinforcing groups and subjectivities.

This is not only true within the moment of taste; it can be extended, in time, to the personal and collective history of the amateur. So conceived, taste is much more than a natural property of humans and things, a miraculous coordination of products and preferences on a market, or a passive social rite: it is an experience, providing an empirical model to analyse our active relationships with things, with ourselves, and with others.

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# **Discovering Quality or Performing Taste? A Sociology of the Amateur**

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This paper draws on a study of amateurs' (i.e. 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 the broad sense referring to any form of love or practice, and not only the restrictive cultured sense of a connoisseurship centred on knowledge of the object itself. Amateurism is contrasted, on 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 professionals. These three levels differ more as different types of engagement than as a degree 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 paper we also performed a systematic comparison with other types of attachment, especially 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 to further our understanding of these diverse forms and mediums of taste, depending on the products tasted.

But our purpose here is to present and justify a new research programme on food taste. A systematic, critical review of the most prominent research on the subject has revealed that when it comes to the status of products concerned by 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 mediums for various rites and mechanisms of social identity, in which

case it is their physical reality that disappears in the analysis. In our opinion, this dualism is detrimental in so far as it eliminates the very object of taste, i.e. uncertainty on the effect that arises, on 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.

Simple adding physiological causes and social determinations is not enough to solve the problem. It totally overlooks 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 are going to attempt to formulate, that of reflexivity. Is taste not, above all, this work on itself? Instead of seeing amateurs as passive subjects of objectifying (naturalizing or sociologizing) 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.

## **Part I. Taste, a polymorphic concept**

A number of sociological and anthropological works offer literature reviews (Goody, 1984), (Beardsworth et Keil, 1997), (Mennell et al., 1992), (Warde, 1997), (Bell et Valentine, 1997) or compilations of key writings (Counihan et Van Esterik, 1997) (Poulain, 2002) (McIntosh, 1996) on taste. These sometimes very complete books can serve to draw up an inventory of the results obtained by various research programmes on food. In this introduction we would, however, like 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 mobilized.

This review<sup>1</sup> 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 of a product by a subject, 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

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<sup>1</sup> We have limited the number of citations, in order to lighten the discussion. For more details see Teil, 93\*\*\*\*.

relevance of a more complete analysis of food, capable of organizing 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 et Armelagos, 1985) or, more often, a functional adaptation (Harris et 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 pleasure experienced which 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), effects of socialization, 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, both daily and throughout the year, as are table manners and the various ways and means through which people enter into contact with

food – the list of 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 wide 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 daily variation of food, for example?

This research has introduced a collective dimension into the question of food: foods as such are not nice; 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 in it without any 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 the 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 multifactoral 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 qualities perceived by actors with an objective quality, some research programmes try to articulate the social and material dimensions of taste (Giachetti, 1996; Giachetti, 1992). An individual's taste is interpreted as a function of 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 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 in the physiological perception of the product that is 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 has 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 stimuli given out by the product. From this 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 putting 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, and that we receive in our bodies without paying much attention to it? In other words, is the individual totally separate from her/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 socialization 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 et Keil, 1997) and between which the individual has to make choices postulated as being a source of anxiety because linked to her/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 (Beck et al., 1994) (Giddens, 1991) (Featherstone, 1991) (Rose et Miller, 1990, 1992). The process of "commodification" observed in markets is concomitant with a reflexive

fragmentation of the demand, transforming the taste of 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 profound divergences sometimes expressed in the debate on food change, they agree that the consumer has more interest in what she/he buys, and that food purchases are a subject of more careful attention, consideration and concern. People's reasons for this attention to themselves differ widely, depending on the author: underlying anxiety, social evolution, or producers' marketing techniques and strategies. But this attention always results in 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 or attention never directly concerns the qualities of foods, which remain either an outside and contingent phenomenon, or an unquestionable material evidence. Although reflexively interested in products, in their food, individuals are nevertheless the hostage 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 her/himself or produces some activity to know what she/he likes, she/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 an historical result often based on practices (Camporesi, 1992) (Capatti, 1989) (Vigarello, 1993) (Flandrin et 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 the 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 (Camporesi, 1989) (Mennell, 1985) (Terrio, 1997), excluding any idea of participation of the product in perception, or that of an objective determinism of good taste (Aron, 1989 (1973)) (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 (Bessy et Chateauraynaud, 1995, Bessy et Chateauraynaud, 1993) (Letablier, 1997) have avoided this



twofold reductionism by taking taste not as a given or a determinant of action, to be explained, but as a result, that of a practice, of an organized 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 did already the analysis by Merleau-Ponty of perception as a reflexive activity engaging objects and not guided by an essence of objects that only science could reveal purely. Here perception is an interaction, a doing that knows it is perceiving, but that is not the revealing of a given to be perceived (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

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 compartmentalization of disciplinary specialities leads to a reduction in the phenomenon observed, causing incompatibility between the hypotheses mobilized. 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 this framework of determinations is incompatible with the idea of a reflexive taste that 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 reconceptualization and reshaping of the analytical tools used to account for all of these aspects of taste.

## **Part II. 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 main describer, 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 a competency of people.

The work presented here is based on comparative ethnographic 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 evidences about the relationship between the amateur and what s/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 (collective or in a solitary way, going out often or mostly practising at home, relying or not on a network of friends and/or other amateurs),
- the long-term physical training or engagement it needs or not (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, but it may be much more diffused, as in the case of gastronomy, or be mostly undertaken collectively in a more or less explicit way, like for a rock band),
- and, finally, the physical form taken by the product, which leads to typical amateur practises like collecting old or specific repertoires, and/or over-investing in technical knowledge about production (like amateurs continuously tinkering 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 since it can be recorded), 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 to the activity, in particular its degree of historicity, the existence of a specific and more or less 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 formalization of training or education and, more broadly, the level of social recognition, valorization and institutionalization.

## **1. A matter of method: beyond external accounts or arbitrary outside references**

### **Amateurs are our informants**

Based on a method we used previously to analyse the advertising profession and its practical theories on objects and desire (Hennion and Méadel 1989), we focus here on the study of amateurs' practices – ways of doing things, manners, maniac procedures, uses 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 theorizing on the basis of their supposedly mute practices, as if they constituted an informal knowledge of which they were not even aware.

Comparing amateurs in various fields, we discover many different definitions of what it is to like something, or to be an amateur of something (and this refers to two different states), but most of them are reflexively and collectively debated and empirically tested by amateurs themselves. In particular, they seem very good at mobilizing, combining or refusing different modes of tasting in practice (briefly, as argued below: focus on the objects, on the collective, on the self, on conditions and technical devices; modes which resemble the rival bases on which disciplines and knowledge have built their theoretical models: physics and bio-chemistry, sociology, psychology and cognitive sciences, technical expertise).

This shift 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 the others' advice to like good products or be sensitive to high quality? Do tastes depend on objective features or properties of the products, or 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, a big part 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 this quality of things)?

### **Strange determinisms, co-produced by amateurs themselves**

Amateurs *do* find their own answers, defining what we call diverse formats of amateurship, except these answers do not look like definite and coherent determinisms relating to theoretical models which scientists are then paid to rationalize (Teil 2003). On the contrary, they are provisional and incoherent trials, self-realizing modalities, focusing on diverse 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 this 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 on-going activity, an accomplishment continuously taking 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 first to take advantage of the extensive know-how they display, when looking for what they prefer, administering their pleasure, evaluating, trying, 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 builders of their own ability to appreciate things and the forgers of the frame of their taste.: 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 pure natural properties which 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 neo-ethnomethodological posture which we plead for 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 fact 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 reflexive 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 Giddens, Beck and Lash (1994). But mostly concerned with political matters and a characterization of modernity, reflexivity as seen by the latter 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 as being dramatically spread between rival disciplines, as if they were competing to give *the* right account of what *the* good taste or the quality of things is. We will now raise a number of questions, present some results of our methodological approach, and show its efficiency in getting away from aporetic binary debates in the field.

### **Great amateurs as an *explicit* source of information**

Tasting, listening to or appreciating something is an essentially silent activity. Does this mean it is only implicit, 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 – perhaps just to recall how much this silent activity constantly resorts to words, by many different means, and that on this matter too it may be time to outdate 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.

### **Another way of avoiding exteriority: interviewers' complementary experiences**

Another way of taking advantage of the comparison between music and wine or food was by using our complementary competences and weaknesses: one of us is a semi-professional expert in wine tasting but simply enjoys music, the other is a great music lover and a former musicologist but only an average *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 between brackets, as is usually done by social scientists, on topics where belonging to the group of great amateurs, being a connoisseur, or simply “knowing a little what all this is about”, is so crucial in interviews. The

interviewer's level of amateurship completely modifies the kind of discourse and observations 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 a pure 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 avoid any explanation in terms of biased perception in both fields.

### **Using the same words to describe wine and music**

Music is mostly described as a *performance*, on the one hand, and is referred to as an artwork, 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 both in terms of aesthetics and, to a minor extent, of a physical and mental conditioning, so that it resembles a music concert. Hence, the idea of using the specific features of each product to see how they apply to the other, in order to gain a possibility of empirically describing diverse formats of amateurship independently (at least relatively) of the objects of this attention, that is to say, not directly deduced from supposed intrinsic properties of either wine and food, or music. It does not mean 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 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 a wine amateur and a music lover. He does think that some wines and some musics are better than others. In the case of wine, he tries and learns first 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. So 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.

But he thinks music is totally different from wine. Music is something abstract that generates emotions and, for him, the quality of music is related to the quality of the emotions he personally perceives and which are strongly related to his past experiences and the ability of the listened music to evoke past experiences. So, in the case of music, he never relies on any advice; he considers it as inapplicable to his case. He listens to music on the radio, waiting for a casual encounter with something he likes; he hears music that friends make him hear, but he

never directly follows their opinion, he just takes it as an opportunity to get to know new music. And whenever he likes a piece, an author, a musician, he buys the record.

Let us regard him first as a wine lover. If you consider taste as a property of a taster, then Raoul has a fully biased behaviour with regard to your criteria. The bias may then be explained by psychological causes: a kind of lack of self-reliance and the influence of experts on the proper judgement of the actors. If you consider taste as a collective process, you might interpret the case by sociological causes, the belonging of the actor to a kind of structuring/structured circle of social differentiation. If you consider taste as a property of the thing tasted, then you will take this case as a probe of a necessary apprenticeship of what reality is, only accessible through scientific procedures of production of knowledge. In any case, from diverse and sometimes contradictory points of view, you always emphasise the fact that taste is the result of a configuration of the amateur-object relationship.

And what about music? His behaviour might be considered as a probe of a cognitive structure for tastes. All other explanations will insist on his biased behaviour, but for another set of causes. The same person who had biased ways of tasting wine because he was obeying the others now only obeys his own feelings, and has a biased taste too., But because he is not aware of musical relevance, he does not reach any aesthetic elaboration, he is not aware of the unconsciously determined nature of his pretended spontaneous preferences, and so on. Do we have to adapt each explanation to each empirical case? A better solution is to turn things upside down: those rationalized and incompatible principles, causing all the practical configurations that real amateurs set up to be deciphered as diverse biases, are simply the basic elements on which amateurs themselves continuously put to the test, elaborate, discuss, oppose and link together the diverse moments and 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; they just try and move on, in a much more variable and flexible way than what they themselves acknowledge, describing these well-known stages which all great amateurs seem to have passed by (“oh, you’re in your ‘only old sticks phase’”, or “oh yes, French opera is just light music? Well, let’s just wait for what you’ll say in 3 years' time!”), and whose character, as dogmatic and assertive as it is limited and provisional, they are keenly aware of.

## **2. 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 record in the lounge, a wine probe in a shop, a music concert, a wine contest, even a scientific experiment – the judgements on taste and quality uttered for the occasion proliferate. Most of the present people do not agree; actually, the same person, even isolated, may change her/his mind.

Most of the existing research works have been dedicated to the "explanation" of this variety. Without trying to characterize 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, mobilizes the following four main definitions:

- a. Taste as a property of the thing tasted
- b. Taste as a collective process
- c. Taste as a result of a device.
- d. Taste as a property of a taster

We could immediately add, for instance, taste as an historical process (this can be included in taste as a collective process), or taste as a behaviour (an extension of the taster's competencies). But the main point is not about the relevance or exhaustiveness of this grid; it is about the status of its basic elements.: Our intention is to return them to the actors themselves, and to describe disciplines as rival ways of rationalizing and purifying each of them, after having snatched that common knowledge from the amateurs' reflexive competencies and transformed it into an objective science.

**Nothing present if not made present**

### **Products**

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 are to be taken as "given", or natural, pre-existing. This is true with regard to any elements, but first of all tasted objects



(the plural form is more appropriate for, as music shows, for instance, tasting is not only about *the work*, *the Object*, it passes through a lot of intermediate objects: the grain 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 between music lovers from opposed aesthetic positions). On the contrary, they are continuously tested, uncertain, tentative, appearing in situation and in the process of performance, as they are both the only means and the products of the amateurs' activity.

### **Collectives**

The same applies to amateurs' collectives. Sociology proceeds a little too fast, as if it were the exclusive gate-keeper of this register. It takes this modality of amateurism out of 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. In fact, 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 other amateurs functioning as models forcing one to depreciate what one loved, and to love what one despised, and those of other people functioning as foils helping one to get rid of inappropriate tastes. Far from being mere *snobbism*, 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.

### **Devices**

Objects/collectives: until now, we were in the territory of the usual debates about the objects of art or taste and sociology. But the other elements open 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 (Teil 2001). One glass for clarets, another one for Burgundy wines. As regards the baroque revival in France in the late seventies and early eighties (Hennion 1997), what was reported afterwards in terms of aesthetic and commercial dual 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 orchestras, tunings, scores, and so on. The

same applies to rock 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, organized 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.

### **Bodies and souls...**

The last leg of our scaffold is probably the one which poses more 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 recognizing 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. Before this important matter, 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 activity. No musical ear before a 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, an autonomous and pre-existing physical body just needing a musical or gourmet training; nor is it a psychological ability to enjoy organized 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, on-going 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 scaffold, that 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: s/he is taking possession of a corporated 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 that 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 reality 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 sheet music (Peacock and Weir 1975).

### **A pragmatic definition of the great amateur**

An amateur always participates in the production of the product s/he likes, as does the reader, in literary theory, or even earlier, the reader as described by Proust in the foreword of the French version of Ruskin’s book, Le Sésame et les lys: a reader who is an actor of literature, made of a set of attitudes not in front of the book, but inside it. Both the difficulty and the interest of this notion of taste is now easier to see, precisely in that it loosens itself from the mere activity of a subject in front of a given object, to appear as a corporal, affective and mental ability, but also as a collective one, an ability induced by the products given to the attention of the taster, but also tightly depending upon material and technical devices of the performance of taste and, then, 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. The amateur appears to be

someone who selects, juxtaposes and co-ordinates ways of elaborating her/his taste. As a result, satisfaction and pleasure are no longer to be considered as the direct consequence – necessarily felt by the subject – of the perfect fit between properties of a product and characteristics of a subject, even a social subject. Satisfaction, pleasure and emotion are purposes of a reflexive questioning by the subject.

All the above points of view try to reduce the variety of judgements on quality to a variety of degradations of a reference point of view defined by a theoretical posture, a specific device or situation aimed at showing the causes involved. But most of the time, these theoretical postures appear to be irrelevant to the actors. Their obsession with a rational, complete and coherent search for a localized cause in a determined part of the taste device is not to be found in their practices. And all these points of view postulate taste as a result that imposes itself on the actors, in spite of them, while these points of view, on the contrary, 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 of them fighting to give more importance to one aspect of their love (wines and works “themselves”, body and mind, social game of participation and rejection, material, economic and technical devices, etc.), these debates should be returned to their real experts: the amateurs. They are the ones who perform the experiments, forced to call themselves into question through the collective trial 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 them.

### **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 a 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 determinisms. 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” (Gomart and Hennion 1999) on which taste relies and from which some effects occur or not, without any amateur or analyst being able to decide on or to master them.

Like those of Becker’s marijuana smokers (Becker 1963), 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 upon 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 have effects, arising from 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 upon the product itself, nor only upon 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. S/he cannot simply objectify them without falling into one of the many strategies of the amateurs, which they have already tested and, most likely, which they have already shown as being outdated.

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