



**Family Living
Focus**
by
Wyoming County
Extension Agent

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TASTE MATTERS

Each of us has a personal range of foods we enjoy. Our preferences for some foods over others result from a complex interplay among many factors such as genetics, age, early food experiences, ethnic customs, pleasantness of surroundings when trying a new food, and physiological reactions to a food.

One thing is clear: The flavor of foods is a most compelling influence in shaping our food choices. In the Food Marketing Institute's Trends in the United States (1998), consumers rank taste as the number one reason for selecting foods, with nutritional placing second. According to the American Dietetic Association's 1997 Nutrition Trends Survey, consumers are attuned to nutrition messages, but fear that eating a more healthful diet means giving up favorite foods.

More To Taste Than Meets The Tongue

What we commonly call the "taste" of food is really "flavor," which largely results from the interaction between the senses of taste and smell. Other sensations from foods (think of the burn of a hot pepper, the bite of a peppermint, or the fizz of a carbonated drink), as well as texture, temperature, and appearance all add to the flavor experience.

As much as 80 percent of what we perceive as "taste" is actually smell. Humans can discern about 20,000 different odors and 10 intensities of each.

True taste occurs on the tongue. We are born with 10,000 taste buds located on the back, sides, and tip of the tongue, on the palate, and in the throat. The Taste receptor cells detect five primary sensations: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and "umam,"

the savory taste of glutamate found in protein foods and monosodium glutamate (MSG). Each taste is sensed throughout the tongue, though we experience some tastes more prominently in certain areas: sweet on the tip, sour on the sides, bitter on the back, and salty mostly around the front.

Taste Changes Through The Ages

Our first flavor experiences are sweet ones. Unborn infants appear to detect sweetness and newborns clearly sense and enjoy sweet tastes.

Breast-fed infants receive early exposure to a variety of flavors because breast milk carries the flavor of foods and spices eaten by the mother. Whether these and other early taste experiences affect food preferences later in life is the subject of ongoing research at the Monell Center.

About age 60, even healthy people begin to experience a modest decline in taste and more dramatic declines in smell. Taste and smell changes in the elderly result from normal aging, medications, certain illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, radiation therapy, and even environmental factors such as pollution. It's difficult to separate out an exact cause of these declines.

Dulled taste and smell often result in a waning appetite, which puts the elderly at risk for malnutrition, weight loss, and

increased susceptibility to disease, and makes the following a therapeutic diet especially challenging. Amplifying food flavors for older people can enhance their appetites and help improve their nutritional and immune status. She suggests using

cheese, bacon bits, or butter-flavored powder to punch up food flavors. Apricot and peach nectars and pineapple juice intensify the flavor of sauces in dishes such as sweet and sour chicken. Source: Food Insight, IFIC Foundation.

Penn State Prof. Honored

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Lowell Wilson, professor emeritus of animal science in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, recently received the American Society of Animal Science's 1999 Industry Service Award at the society's annual meeting in Indianapolis, Ind.

The award, sponsored by the Pharmacia and Upjohn Company, is presented annually to recognize members who have distinguished themselves in service to the animal industry. The award citation states, "Wilson's ability to identify and focus on significant problems and to effectively enlist the efforts of others are a testament to his curiosity, imagination, industriousness and dedication to animal agriculture."

Recently retired from Penn State, Wilson authored more than 135 peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts and more than 550 articles. His research

included breed evaluation, pasture and waste utilization, veal production, growth promotants and public/producer assessment of production methods. He also has been instrumental in the formation and success of several professional organizations, including the Pennsylvania Cattleman's Association, the Pennsylvania Beef Council, Pennsylvanians for the Responsible Use of Animals and the Indiana Cattlemen's Association.

Wilson maintains a vigorous teaching, service and research schedule. He also works as a consultant to several private companies and associations, and serves as executive director of Pennsylvanians for the Responsible Use of Animals. Recently, he was appointed editor of the Professional Animal Scientist Journal published by the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists. Wilson and his wife, Mary, own a beef cattle farm near Wellsboro.

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