

## **This is a free sample lesson from Foodist Kitchen**

### **TODAY YOU'LL LEARN:**

How to cook using flavor profiles

### **TODAY'S ACTIVITY:**

Experiment with flavors when you cook dinner tonight



Today is one of my favorite lessons. Did you know that you have the single most powerful weapon used by the world's greatest cooks built right into your face?

That's right, your tongue.

Your tongue helps you know if things are ready. It helps you tell if you need more salt. But most important, your tongue is your ultimate guide for deciding which ingredients go

together.

You've probably heard that your tongue can detect four different tastes: sweet, salty, sour and bitter. Then someone came along and discovered umami, or a "savory" taste (think soy sauce or mushrooms), making it five tastes.

Ever wonder why our tongues evolved to detect those tastes?

Each of the five tastes gives your brain important information about what nutrients the food has to offer, as well as whether the food you're tasting is good or bad for you.

- **Sweet** foods tell your brain there are carbohydrates, or energy, in your food. Your brain loves energy, so it is hardwired to love sweet flavors. Babies actually prefer sugar water over breast milk. Crazy, right?
- **Salty** foods contain salt, which your body uses to maintain water balance. Water balance is essential for survival, so your brain loves when some (but not too much) salt is added to food.
- **Umami** signals to your brain that there are amino acids in the food, which means protein. These are the building blocks of all the cells in your body.
- **Sour** food signals the presence of acid and fermentation, which are important to your digestion. Some vitamins, like vitamin C, also have a sour taste.
- **And bitter taste**, well, that's a mystery science still hasn't figured out. Some have hypothesized that a bitter taste indicates the presence of small amounts of toxin that actually strengthen your body, a property called *hormesis*. But this hasn't been proven. One thing we know for sure is that many of the healthiest foods--dark leafy greens, chocolate, coffee--have a subtle and pleasant bitter taste.

Isn't evolution just so damn sexy?

But tastes are just one piece of the puzzle.

## Flavor is what you really care about

Flavor is the art of combining these tastes with all of the other sensations that your brain can experience, such as aroma, texture, juiciness, mouthfeel and color.

All these things are what make up flavor, and flavor is what you ultimately care about.

Have you ever had a friend say, "I know this looks weird, but trust me, it tastes REALLY

good!”

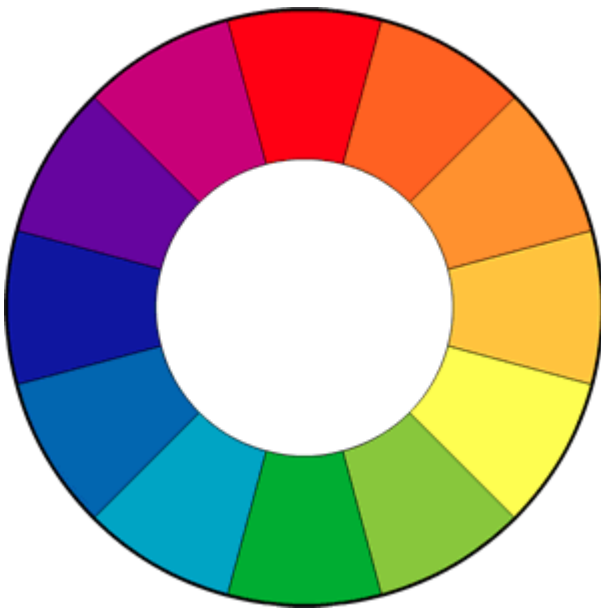
Or have you ever just been turned off by a food because it was weirdly crunchy or mushy, even though the actual taste was OK?

All these factors are taken into consideration when thinking about a food’s flavor profile.

Cooking is all about balancing and contrasting different sensory experiences. Just like art is about balancing and contrasting colors and textures.

And STOP... metaphor time.

Remember the color wheel from art class?



This guy.

When Mrs. Art Teacher first whipped out this bad boy, you learned for the first time that there IS some higher truth to which colors go together and which ones don’t.

Colors aren’t random. They’re a logical progression that our brain understands.

But you don’t need to keep a copy of the color wheel in your wallet in order to know which colors go well together and which colors don’t. When you see them next to each other, you just know.

Why? Because you’re human, and this wheel was created based on how our brain perceives

colors.

It's the same thing with taste and flavor.

Chances are, you already have an intuition of what does and doesn't go together, because you're a human and you've been eating food for decades. That's right, you already have DECADES of training.

All we're going to do in this lesson is point out what your body already knows tastes good or bad, and explain why it works that way. Turns out, there's a method to the flavor madness.

## **Think of a flavor profile as a balancing act**

There are any number of things that can go into a dish's flavor profile, but the main ones you need to remember are:

**SWEETNESS      FATTINESS**

**SALTINESS      ACIDITY**

**BITTERNESS**

If we were to follow the rules of the color wheel, our flavor wheel would look something like this:

- Fattiness and sweetness are complements
- Saltiness and acidity are complements
- Both groups contrast each other
- Bitterness... well, we'll talk about bitterness later

## **Saltiness**



Salt revives bland flavors. If you've ever tasted a dish at a restaurant and then reached for the salt shaker, you're already familiar with what an under-salted dish tastes like.

If you've ever made a recipe and thought it was just kinda meh, it probably needed salt.

Salt contrasts well against the fattiness or sweetness of a dish and can also cut bitter flavors.

For example, fries taste good with salt on them because the salt and fat balance each other out.

People also love caramel popcorn and kettle corn because they contrast saltiness and sweetness.

In other words, salt makes almost everything taste better so long as you don't overdo it.

## Sweetness



Sweetness is one of our favorite sensations, but you have probably had the experience of eating or drinking something that is too sweet.

When working with sweetness keep in mind that you can balance it with sourness or acidity.

Think salad with fresh strawberries and vinaigrette. Why do the strawberries and vinegar go together? Because one is sweet and the other is acidic.

**(Fun fact:** phosphoric acid is added to many soft drinks because its tangy, acidic taste cuts the sweetness of the soda. This is why you're able to tolerate soda with large amounts of sugar in it without perceiving it as too sweet.)



## Fattiness



Fattiness is essential for our perception that a meal is luxurious and delicious. It also contributes to a smoother texture and mouthfeel. Meals taste decadent when they contain more fat.

Even though one of the reasons to cook more meals at home is that they are healthier, we can still take a page from the restaurants' playbook and add a little extra fat to take a meal from passable to stunning.

We'll talk more about nutrition in a future lesson, but for now know that fat is not innately bad. In fact, it is essential.

Of course, that doesn't mean you have to throw a stick of butter into your dish. Just don't be afraid of the fat.

A drizzle of olive oil or a pat of butter will do wonders to change up the flavor.

## Acidity



Acidity is a sour taste like lemon juice or vinegar, and it highlights and brightens the existing flavors of your meal. It also serves to cut the taste of a fatty or sweet dish.

When you eat something fatty, the oils coat your tongue and eventually dull your taste receptors. Acid washes that fat away, allowing you to taste the flavors like your very first bite.

This is one reason steak and red wine are best friends.

So if you have a dish that is full of delicious fat, but still missing a little something, balancing it out with a burst of acid will make the dish really pop.



This works for sweet dishes too--add something acidic to make the sweetness feel fresh with every bite. (Remember the strawberries and vinegar?)

One thing to remember: if you're adding something acidic to cooked food (as opposed to, say, a salad), you'll want to add it towards the end. The acidic flavor breaks down quickly in heat.

That's why lemon wedges are served with your food instead of the chef just squeezing it in during cooking. They're not just a pretty garnish--they're served separately so the acidity doesn't break down.

## Bitterness



Bitterness is often glossed over in discussions of flavor profiling.

Bitter foods sometimes get a bad wrap, because bitterness can be a signal of burnt or poorly prepared food.

However, great chefs know how to use bitter flavors to highlight foods and achieve perfect

balance, especially against other strong flavors. Think whiskey cocktails with bitters, or a perfectly roasted cup of coffee.

Bitter foods are balanced out by sweet and fatty flavors. Saltiness can also reduce the taste of bitterness.

Dark chocolate with sea salt or milk, or grapefruit with sugar on it are great examples.

Bitter flavors also, surprisingly, go well together. Radicchio and endives (both just fancy names for bitter-tasting types of lettuce) are often put together in a salad for this reason.

Bitterness can be a hard one to master, especially since we don't come across the taste often. Typically people learn to appreciate bitter flavors more as their palate matures and balance and complexity become more important.

For now just remember that bitterness is there when you need it. If it shows up in your dish, 50 bonus points to you.

## **Use Your Powers Wisely**

Flavor profiles are what take your dishes from edible to mouthgasm.

But sometimes a crazy contrasting dish isn't what you're looking for.

Think about your favorite comfort foods. Mac-n-cheese, casserole, grilled cheese, chicken pot pie....

If you're going gourmet, you might start drizzling balsamic and roasted cherry tomatoes all over that stuff. But if you're just trying to make some good ol' fashioned comfort food, maybe you just want something more simple.

So while cooking is all about the contrasts and balance of flavors, know when to go crazy and when simplicity will suffice.

Sometimes you want to assault your tastebuds with a plethora of flavor that makes you go "Holy s#%!, this is unreal!" And sometimes you just want to take a bite, smile, and say "mmmmm."

Tomorrow, we'll talk about where spices come into play with this whole flavor thing. But first, let's pause and put what you've learned into practice.

## ACTIVITY: Experimenting With Flavor Profiles

You're going to keep cooking the meal you've been practicing this week with: vegetables, meat or other protein, and a grain.

But today (and tomorrow), we're going to use your grain to experiment on.

Dice and cook your vegetables and protein as we've been doing, however you'd like--sauté or roast those suckers.

Cook your grain (pasta, rice, etc.) as usual. Skip the lentils this time, we want a bland base today and tomorrow to experiment with flavor.

Don't add oil or anything else to the water you're using to cook it.

Now raid your kitchen and grab a couple of items that fit the different flavor profile categories we discussed. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started:

- **SALT:** Salt (obvs), soy sauce, garlic salt, parmesan cheese, bacon
- **SWEET:** Fruit (note: some fruit might taste more acidic than sweet), caramelized onions, roasted red peppers
- **FAT:** Olive oil or butter
- **ACID:** Lemon, lime, vinegar, Tabasco, a non-sweet wine, tomatoes
- **BITTER:** Chocolate or cacao nibs, dark greens, beer

Scoop a little bit of your bland base into a bowl. Add something from one category and taste it.

Does it taste OK on its own? If you add something from another category, how does that affect the taste? What about the same category?

Notice what happens when you add oil alone, versus oil and some salt. What if you squeeze a lemon on there?

What tasted great? What was terrible? How much is too much? Test out different amounts.

Keep playing around until you get a sense of how and why flavors interact the way they do. Try to notice patterns, especially the ones you like best.

Share your revelations with the Foodist Kitchen community (or keep them all to yourself,

that's cool).

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