

Editor's note: This section contains reviews of books, whether brand new or classic, that we hope will be of interest to our readers.

Book Review

Seduced by a Burger (Again)

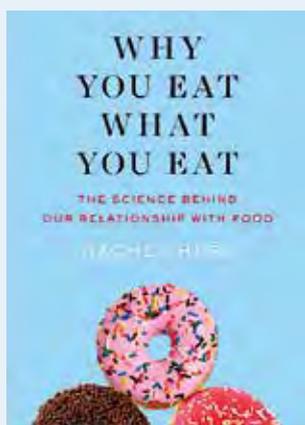
Why You Eat What You Eat: The Science behind Our Relationship with Food

Rachel Herz

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It is one of the most famous moments in literature; so famous that it acquired its own name. The first person ever to experience a 'Proustian moment' was the French author Marcel Proust himself.

Proust recounts it at the opening of his novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, translated variously as *Remembrance of Things Past* and *In Search of Lost Time*, which was published in seven volumes in the

years between 1913 and 1927.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this moment is that almost nothing happens in it. A young boy eats a cake, a '*petite madeleine*,' dipped in some tea. And yet the experience of the combined flavors has a permanently transformational effect on the narrator's sensibility as he recalls it to mind:

"... one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called '*petites madeleines*,' which look as though

they had been molded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savors, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?"¹

If Proust provided a philosophical explanation of the 'madeleine moment,' Rachel Herz offers a scientific one in this remarkable book. "Scent brings back our most emotional and evocative memories," she writes, "and without a sense of smell we lose not only this unique experience but also pieces of ourselves. Proust wrote that in the years between the original event and tasting the madeleine, he had never recalled his childhood moments ... Aromas and flavors awaken facets of our lives that might otherwise be forever forgotten."²

Probably all of us are aware at some level of the link between aroma, flavor, emotion and memory, but how many of us know that the color of a plate can alter one's perception of the food presented on it? Or that the shape into which a food is cut will influence how sweet or savory it appears to taste? Or again, that the level of lighting in a restaurant has an impact on how quickly one eats?

The factors that influence every eating decision we make

This is a powerfully useful book. Writing with the panache of a popular journalist and the rigor of a scientific researcher, Herz explores the factors that influence every eating decision we make. Starting right at the beginning, she discusses the "fab



“Sadly, the failure rate of diets is a whopping 95 percent.”³

four” basic tastes of sweet, sour, salty and bitter, before going on to consider the role of fat and spice in making food appealing; the sense of smell and the action of aroma; various eating disorders, including avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder and anorexia; the influence of visual and auditory stimuli on the perception of food; and the various ways in which excessive food intake might be combatted.

“Pornography,” she writes, with typical directness, “is the number one most searched-for term on the Internet, and, according to the celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, ‘food’ is number two. Ironically, with today’s obsessive attachment to screens, we pay more attention to images of food than we do to the food we are eating. This state of affairs almost guarantees overconsumption, since staring at sumptuous high-calorie foods motivates us to want to eat more, while lack of attention to actual eating decreases our ability to monitor both intake and satisfaction.”⁴

That tightly packed concluding sentence gives a good impression of the insight and energy that inform every page of this remarkable work. Herz’s scrupulous analysis is always thought-provoking and frequently amusing; it is never moralistic or judgmental. She considers our relationship with food with curiosity and compassion, finding in every facet of it an aspect of the human condition. Referencing the French culinary connoisseur Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826), who famously observed, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are,” she concludes this cornucopia of a book with a paragraph that we should perhaps all copy out and stick on our fridges:

“Food nourishes the body and the soul, and knowing how to get the most from our senses and our mind while eating

makes it all that it can be. Food is an aesthetic, texture and design immersion, whether you turn a salad into a Kandinsky painting or not. Food connects us to our past, to other people, to the world, and to ourselves. Food is memory, celebration, identity, conversation, emotion, glory, pleasure, pain, fear, disgust, comfort, and guilt. Food is aromatic, salty, sour, bitter, savory, tingly, hot, and cold. Food is flavor and savor, art and sight, sound and music, texture and design, words and poetry, divine and decadent. Food is love and food is life. And knowledge of how our mind and body are affected by our food choices, and how our senses and psychology alter our experience of food and the consequences of eating, is power.”

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03. Ibid., p. 110.
04. Ibid., pp. 265–66.

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