



How Focusing on the Pleasure of Eating Can Reduce Obesity

To increase public health and food company margins, food marketers must realise size and pleasure are not correlated—at least when it comes to food.

The food industry is a tough place to be these days. They feed the planet the food that we love, safely and cheaply, but are getting little credit for it. Instead, as I **explained previously**, they are getting pummeled by health scientists, governments, foodies, and now even the business press for contributing to the obesity epidemic. And the worst part is that these critics are generally right, as I have made myself clear in a recent **review paper**.

Today's supersized food portions

In addition to blaming the food industry for crafting irresistible food with little nutritional value and for marketing it relentlessly, critics are rightly pointing out that portion sizes have grown beyond control. Consider that, for the first 60 years or so of its existence, Coca Cola was only available in one bottle size: 19 cl (6.5 ounces), significantly less than the 33 cl (12 oz) “extra-small” or “kid-size” cup in many fast food restaurants. We have become so used to large portion sizes that New Yorkers revolted when Mayor Bloomberg planned to limit single servings in restaurants to 16 oz, an amount that, not so long ago, was advertised as serving three!



One solution that I have **previously argued for** is to return to the old standard sizes, either by slimming down package sizes in a creative way or simply by reintroducing the old regular size to the menu, which will help people realise how large today's portions have become.

Pleasure as the ally of healthy eating?

But here I present a more radical approach, one that involves a major shift for the industry's business model, but also offers the biggest win-win potential in combined terms of public health, the growth of a major sector of our economy (and heritage), and enjoyment for the eaters we all are. The idea is a really rather simple one: in our wealthy corner of

the world, hunger has pretty much disappeared and food is no longer about energy. For the vast majority of people, food isn't about health either—otherwise there would not be countries where obese people now outnumber those with a healthy weight.

Eating is, first and foremost, about pleasure. So what if food marketers focused on pleasure instead of, volume and value, calories and cost—as if they were in the energy business? And what if public health campaigns or parents focused on pleasure, not health and not fear of diabetes-induced amputation (as advertised below)? Could pleasure be a path to both healthier eating and sustainable growth for the industry?



Pleasure: Beyond the Sin of Gluttony

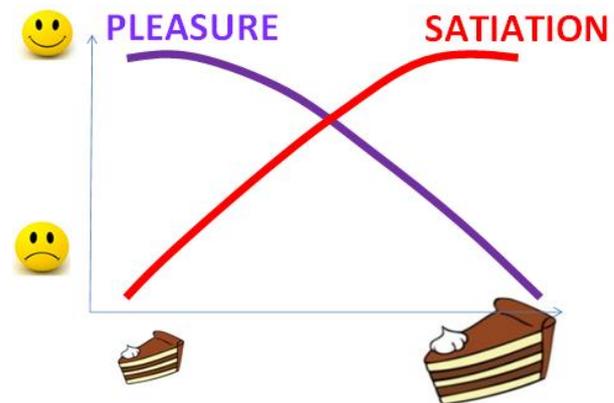
The mere idea of associating “pleasure” and “better eating habits” might seem preposterous, accustomed as we are to pitching pleasure against health. Just call any food product “unhealthy”, for instance, and a majority of U.S. consumers (this is less true in France) will tend to perceive it as tasty. Besides, it is certainly true that the mere sight (and smell) of appetising foods is often enough to induce desire, especially if one happens to be on a diet.

We should also mention the contempt in which our Western philosophy has long held the sense of taste – less noble than sight or hearing; more subjective, more self-centred, more reminiscent of our animal nature as well. Moreover, isn't gluttony of the seven deadly sins? One thing is for sure: pleasure is the industry's Trojan horse, the focus of their attention and as such, incompatible with healthier eating behaviours.

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Happier with less food

We spontaneously tend to associate pleasure and quantity, as if pleasure accumulates with each bite just the way each bite satiates hunger. Actually, and rather ironically, the opposite happens. Research in food physiology shows that maximum pleasure is reached with the very first bites and quickly recedes with each additional bite. In addition, the pleasure we enjoy immediately after consuming a portion – a slice of cake for instance – is mainly determined by how much we enjoyed the very last bite. As a consequence, the larger the portion consumed, the smaller the enjoyment (see below)!



In a series of recent studies with INSEAD PhD student Yann Cornil, we established that highlighting gustatory pleasure – through imagination – increases the attractiveness of smaller portions relative to bigger ones because it helps people realise that they will actually be happier with more reasonable food portions.

We carried out several experiments with many different consumers, including 5-year-old French children, young French Parisian women, and adult Americans of both genders. All participants were allowed to choose a slice of cake among several portions of varying sizes. Before choosing, we asked some of the participants to imagine the sensory pleasure (in terms of taste, smell, and texture) that they would get from eating hedonic foods like chocolate mousse or vanilla ice cream. Participants who focused on pleasure systematically opted for smaller portions.

As a benchmark, we compared our pleasure-focus intervention to the fear-focused tactics favoured by governments. Both led people to choose smaller food portions, but there was a critical difference. People who chose smaller food portions because of health concerns felt worse off and longed for the “forbidden” larger portions that—they thought—would have been more satisfying. Those who chose smaller portions because they realised that they would provide the highest sensory pleasure did not feel any regret and were actually

willing to pay more for their smaller cake portion!

It follows that pleasure does not have to be the nemesis of healthy and moderate food consumption. Not only that, it can also become an ally against obesity, without threatening the margins of food marketers and restaurant owners in the least. Inviting consumers to focus on pleasure, or even positioning some hedonic foods (such as chocolate bars) as “sensory experiences” instead of “snacks”, might prove more efficient than health appeals – with the additional benefit that eating enjoyment will not be damaged. It is thus high time the food industry switched its focus from quantity and calories towards quality and pleasure.

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