
How to Get More Value from Less Food



By Pierre Chandon , INSEAD

Marketing focused on the multisensory properties of food can encourage people to eat less and experience more pleasure.

The first bite of something delicious, say a chocolate mousse, is always the most pleasurable. The next mouthfuls are slightly less enjoyable and, if the portion is large, the last bites are often bland or make us feel queasy.

What most people **fail to realise**, however, is that the total enjoyment from eating **is not the sum of the pleasure experienced with each bite**, but its average. The last bites tend to bring the average enjoyment down, which is why we often regret them.

Drawing on this insight, **Yann Cornil*** and I have demonstrated in a series of studies that training **people in a lab** or **children in schools** to focus on the sensory experience of eating can **increase the appeal of smaller portions**. This can lead them to choose and consume less than usual.

Sensory training has proven to be effective in contexts where participants are given explicit instructions. But how can it be practically implemented

using labels on food products or descriptive language on restaurant menus? And how will this influence how much customers are willing to pay?

In our most recent paper, published in [Appetite](#), we show how food marketers can leverage these insights to make their customers willing to spend more on smaller food portions. This can result in a triple win for health, business and overall eating enjoyment.

Our recommendation is to emphasise the aesthetic, multisensory properties when describing food. We call this epicurean labelling because it is consistent with the teaching of the Greek philosopher Epicurus who wrote in a [letter to Menoecus](#) that the wise person does not choose the largest portion of food but the most pleasing.

Finding the sweet spot

In our first study, we offered participants a fixed three-course lunch for €15 at a French culinary school cafeteria. While the food was identical, we manipulated the menu given to customers. For the control group, the menu succinctly described the meal: “Gnocchi, spinach salad, vinaigrette” as a starter, “Beef shepherd’s pie, tomato and pesto sauce” as a main dish, and “Lemon tartlets, red berry coulis” as a dessert.

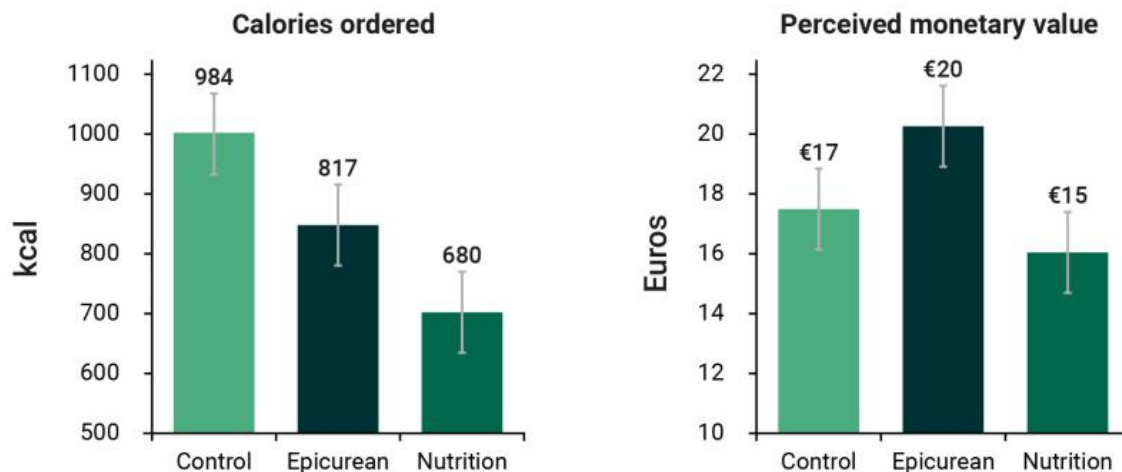
The epicurean-labelled menu included descriptions with a multisensory focus, such as: “Lemon tartlets with red berry coulis: Crunchy pie crust pastry topped with an elegant slightly sour lemon cream, signed with a dark chocolate comma. Smooth seasonal red berry coulis”. As a benchmark, we also included a nutrition-labelled menu with the same descriptions as the control menu, but with additional information about calorie and fat content.

Paying customers could choose as many portions as they wanted and estimated a fair price for the meal they had chosen. We found that customers in the control condition had an average calorie intake of 984 kilocalories and estimated that the meal was worth €17.

In contrast, the calorie intake of those exposed to the epicurean menu was 817 kilocalories, 17 percent less than those who ordered off the control menu. Despite eating less, customers in the epicurean condition valued the experience at €20, a 16 percent increase over those with the control menu. Ultimately, these customers were happier and willing to pay more for less food. They also anticipated a more pleasurable experience after reading the

sensory-based menu and ate at a slower pace, indicating that they savoured their food.

Customers exposed to the nutrition-labelled menu consumed just 680 kcal, 31 percent less than the control condition. However, the decrease was so drastic that we suspect some of them stopped somewhere on the way home to get dessert! The biggest issue from a business standpoint is that they were also unsatisfied with the experience, valuing it at an estimated €15.



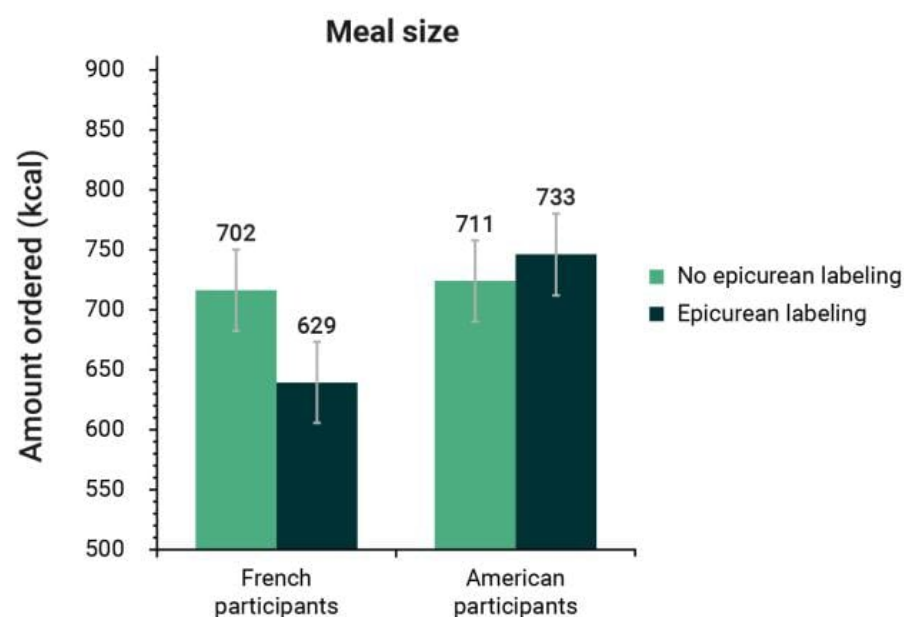
In essence we found that epicurean labelling had three clear advantages. First, it was better for people’s health as it encouraged people to eat moderate portions. Second, it was better for business because people ate less food for the same price. Third, it increased overall pleasure since people enjoyed the meal more.

Will it play in Peoria?

While epicurean labelling proved effective in our French cafeteria study, we didn’t know if we would see the same effect among American customers. France and the United States are at the opposite ends of a hedonic-utilitarian food attitude spectrum – the French associate eating with pleasure, while Americans focus on aspects such as nutrition and value for money. Moreover, portion sizes tend to be smaller in French restaurants.

To determine if epicurean labelling would make French, but not American, participants choose smaller portions, we replicated the cafeteria study online with hypothetical food choices. Participants were randomly assigned to see either the control or epicurean menu from the previous study. After looking at photos of the sample plates, they indicated the number of portions they would order for each dish and estimated the value of their meal.

As predicted, French respondents “ordered” smaller meals overall, while Americans chose a similar amount irrespective of the menu they read. Although Americans did not choose a smaller meal, they were willing to pay more for a meal off the epicurean menu, much like their French counterparts.



From restaurants to supermarkets

Next, we examined the effect of epicurean labels on food products in French and American supermarkets. Using data collected by market research company Mintel Corporation, we compared information on the price, size and product descriptions on food packaging. We found that France had a larger proportion of products with at least one sensory descriptor.

In contrasting the average size and price of these products, we noted that products with sensory labels tended to be packaged in smaller quantities in France but were not commensurately cheaper in price. In other words, the

price per kilogram was higher because they were considered premium products. In the US, however, there was hardly any difference in product size, but sensory-labelled products were markedly more expensive.

These results infer that food marketers in these two countries use different rules when setting the price and package size of products with sensory labels. It seems that French consumers associate pleasure in food with smaller quantity, and are willing to pay more for it, whereas Americans are willing to pay more for higher quality but don't want less food as a result.

From 'food as fuel' to 'food as pleasure'

In the [fight against obesity](#), public health authorities have tried to promote moderate eating and healthy diets by adding [nutrition labels](#) to food products and menus. Here, we argue that emphasising the aesthetic, multisensory properties of food is a promising alternative.

More generally, food companies need to change their business model. Rather than selling more calories to more people for more money — the “food as fuel” model — they need to grow their business by selling fewer calories but more enjoyment, the “food as pleasure” model.

Our findings also challenge the widely held belief that pleasure is the enemy of healthy eating – an attitude that is more pervasive in the US. We prove that underscoring the aesthetic, multisensory dimensions of pleasure through epicurean labelling can promote portion control (a win for health), encourage savouring (a win for pleasure) and increase the monetary valuation of smaller portions (a win for business).

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/how-get-more-value-less-food>

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About the research

"More value from less food? Effects of epicurean labeling on moderate eating in the United States and in France" is published in *Appetite*.