

# Brian Wansink on Expectations, Flavor, and Eating



Brian Wansink is a professor at Cornell University, where he studies the way we interact with food. He is also the author of two books, *Mindless Eating* (Bantam, 2007) and *Slim by Design* (William Morrow, 2014), that examine how we make our choices about what we eat.

## What things change our perceptions of what we think we're smelling and tasting?

The French have an expression that says that there's no accounting for taste. It's certainly not true, other than at the very extremes of taste range. People are tremendously subjective, to the point where our taste buds end up being engineered by our expectations. If somebody says, "Taste this; it's bitter," we're going to say, "It's bitter!" But if someone says, "Hey, this is sort of bland" with the same food, we're gonna go, "Yeah, it's bland." We find this over and over again: the easiest way to change people's taste interpretation is to change their taste expectation beforehand.

## Where are people getting their taste expectations from?

Your visual perception of food will bias your taste. We find that if we change the color of lemon Jell-O with red food

coloring and call it cherry, people go, "Oh, that's good cherry Jell-O." We find that changing the way food is plated matters. If we put a brownie on a nicer china plate instead of a paper plate, people are willing to pay almost twice as much for it. We even find putting a silly piece of garnish on a plate really boosts how much people are willing to pay.

Another aspect is how much effort we think was put into the food. If we think that not very much effort was put into the food, we rate it as much lower. We also find that if you give something a name like "succulent Italian seafood filet," people go, "This is good," but if you just call it "seafood filet," people like it less.

## It sounds like expectations are incredibly important. There must be a challenge in not setting expectations too high?

No, not at all. We have never found that it backfires. Let's say I serve you a steak, and go, "Here's some steak." You try it and go, "That was pretty good, I'd give it a 6." Then I serve a second identical steak but say, "I'm going to give you the most amazing, incredible steak in the world. It was hand-massaged by midgets for years, blah blah blah." Where are expectations set? They are set high. Then you eat that steak and say, "It's kind of tough and a little bit dry. It wasn't really that good. It's only about a 6.5." What's going on here is anchoring. Even when you really overreach expectations, it doesn't make people say, "It sucks." They still rate it above what they would rate it if you'd given them no expectation at all.

We brought in sales execs who, on average, spent over \$25,000 a year on expense accounts on food. These people should know fine dining. We gave them Chef Boyardee. We put it on a plate, and read them the back of the can, something like, "This comes from a generations-old recipe from Italy; it's been made more times than can be counted." They rated it better when not told it's Chef Boyardee, at least for people who are on huge expense accounts. If you grew up never having branded products because they cost too much, the Chef Boyardee brand might give the food a halo.

## How does that halo play into our expectations?

Brands have a great halo when you like the original brand. If you like KC Masterpiece Barbecue, and there is a cobranded frozen "KC Masterpiece Barbecue burgers," you're going to go, "Oh, that's gonna be good," more so than if the package just said "Barbecue burgers."

This halo can backfire. We looked at how a person's perception of soy being in a food contributes to them thinking it's terrible. We gave people energy bars. The energy bars had 10 grams of vegetable protein; it wasn't soy. We changed the label so it said either "Contains 10 grams of protein" or "Contains 10 grams of soy protein." By planting that first suggestion in people's minds, they'd say, "This is great. It's chocolate-y. It's got a nice texture." For the soy protein label, they'd say, "Doesn't taste like chocolate. I can't get the taste out of my mouth." It's the exact same thing. People were tasting what they thought they were going to taste.

### **Is there a health halo, where things that are perceived as being healthy end up ranking lower in taste studies?**

In one of our cafeteria studies with kids, we had a vegetable and pasta dish that we either labeled as healthy, as fresh, or nothing. Simply by labeling something healthy made people rate it worse than if it was labeled either as fresh or as just zucchini pasta. Most people's perception of healthy is that healthy is something that they have to do. No one says, "I had this incredibly healthy dessert."

These perceptions of health can almost poison your view. I've got three little girls at home. We never used the word "healthy" when we'd give them things, and now they like healthy things.

### **I take it that's an issue for nutrition policy, with perception around health of foods?**

Yeah, mainly because people in nutrition policy aren't trained as behaviorists.

### **Well, then, what's the behaviorist's approach for changing the way people eat?**

First, you make it more convenient to eat. Second, you make it more attractive. Third, you make it more normal to eat. Under those three things, there are legions of changes.

Say I want my kids to eat vegetables. Do I tell them, "Eat them—they're healthy for you"? No. What I do is this: the first thing we bring out at dinnertime is salad and vegetables. Everybody gets them, and we sit there until we're done eating them. Only then does the pasta and chicken come out. This makes it a whole lot more convenient to eat better.

For attractiveness, say we have zucchini as part of dinner. I'll say, "What are we having tonight, honey?" My wife would

describe it and say, "Zucchini. Do you guys know what zucchini is? Do you know what it tastes like? Does it taste like a cantaloupe?" Just a little bit of discussion raises curiosity. It's going to be an adventure to try.

You can also make things more normal to try. When my kids wouldn't eat something, I'd say, "Well, if you're not going to eat it, can I?" They go, "Yeah." So I take a bite. I say, "That's good. That's really good, honey. I like it!" The kid is smugly thinking, "Oh, I fooled him." A few minutes later, I'll reach over and take another bite and go, "Yeah, this is good. Thanks, honey! You'll have to make more of it." So all of a sudden, the kid is seeing, "Wait a minute. You're taking my stuff!" Kids feel the endowment effect just as much as adults do. After a few times of doing that, it's like, "Stop taking my stuff, dad."

### **What about things like plate size and plate color—how do those things impact eating?**

The color thing is really neat. Most people want a simple thing, but it's one step removed from being simple. We find that color doesn't matter; it's the color *contrast* between what you're serving and the color of your plate that matters.

We had an alumni reunion here at Cornell where they got either red or white pasta and either red or white plates. We found that if you're serving red-on-red or white-on-white, you're going to serve 19% more pasta than if you're serving white-on-red or red-on-white. If the contrast is there when you're serving, you go, "Whoa. That's enough." If the contrast isn't there, you tend to serve until you go, "Whoops, a little too much."

This happens every day and it doesn't matter if it's healthy or unhealthy food. The greater the contrast between what you

serve and the plate color: 19%. We find it when we have people serve peas that are either on a green plate or on a yellow plate. You want people to eat more peas, right? They're going to serve more peas on a green plate than they are on a yellow plate because of the contrast. We have people serve pudding. They serve more chocolate pudding on a dark plate than on a yellow plate. They serve more banana pudding on a yellow plate than a dark plate.

What are you most in danger of overeating? For most people, it's white foods. So you don't have to have 50 colored plates, just have darker plates.

### **Anything else that home cooks should know about to make their meals more enjoyable?**

Turn down the lighting. We find that when we turn down lighting, people eat slower, and they rate the food as better. We did this cool study in a fast-food restaurant that was doing a reconstruction. We were able to break it in half so that one half was fine-dining style and the other half was typical bright lights and loud music. We found that simply turning down the lighting led people to eat about a third longer, eat about 18% less, and rate the food as being a lot better.

### **How much of this is based on a feeling of it being a fine-dining experience? I know that fine dining, culturally for Americans, is supposed to be dim light.**

I think it might be that, but I think it might also be priming anxiousness and activity and distraction. We had a little bit of a disappointment with something at home the other day, and we had to try to resurrect the night and make it special. We said, "We're gonna eat by candlelight, but only candlelight." The girls just loved it.