



Understanding the food preferences of people of low socioeconomic status

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Abstract

Scholars have long studied consumer taste dynamics within class-stratified contexts, but relatively little attention has been paid to the taste preferences of low-socioeconomic-status groups. We analyze interview data from 254 individuals from 105 families across Canada to explore the cultural repertoires that guide low-socioeconomic-status consumer tastes in food. Empirically, we ask which foods respondents prefer, and for what reasons, across socioeconomic status groups. Analytically, we argue that low-socioeconomic-status respondents demonstrate aesthetic preferences that operate according to four cultural repertoires that are distinctly different from that of high-socioeconomic-status omnivorous cultural consumption. Our respondents display tastes for foods from corporate brands, familiar “ethnic” foods, and foods perceived as healthy. While low-socioeconomic-status taste preferences in food are shaped by quotidian economic constraints – what Bourdieu called “tastes of necessity” – we show how cultural repertoires guiding low-socioeconomic-status tastes relate to both material circumstances and broader socio-temporal contexts. Our findings advance debates about the nature of low-socioeconomic-status food ideals by illuminating their underlying meanings and justifications and contribute to scholarly understanding of low-socioeconomic-status consumption.

Keywords

Class inequality, consumer tastes, cultural repertoires, food, poverty

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Introduction

While much is known about “foodies” (Johnston and Baumann, 2015) and how upscale food culture serves as a source of status and distinction, less is known about the food tastes of individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES). Prior research documents what foods low-SES people buy (Darmon and Dreowski, 2008, 2015) and how concerns about food consumption are class-stratified, especially around health (Bennett et al., 2009: 164–168; Inglis et al., 2005). Yet we have a poor understanding of what those with low-SES *like* in food, and a similarly poor understanding of *why*. We draw from a large-scale Canadian interview project to investigate the food preferences of people of low-SES. We move beyond an analysis of necessary consumption choices to an analysis of respondents’ food ideals in the hypothetical absence of economic constraints and through perceptions of foods that impress others. Our analysis focuses on what foods low-SES participants describe as desirable and how they justify their preferences. In doing so, we show that low-SES participants work with different adjudication criteria from their high-SES counterparts.

This article presents a novel analysis of low-SES tastes that relates to both household economic circumstances and broader socio-temporal contexts. While low-SES food choices have a connection to “tastes of necessity” (Bourdieu, 1984: 374–376), we reveal the cultural repertoires (Lamont, 1992) respondents draw on when expressing food tastes and relate these repertoires to broader forces such as transnational migration, cultural globalization, dominant health discourses, and the corporatization of the food sector.

There is currently debate about the extent to which class differences in food consumption reflect differences in food knowledge, affordability, cooking skills, and tastes (namely, Alkon et al., 2013). Darmon and Dreowski’s (2008) review concludes that while the relationship between SES and quality of nutritional intake is positive, there is conflicting evidence about how that relationship is shaped by food costs, food access, or the educational and cultural traits of low-SES people. This article contributes by showing that aesthetic food preferences vary between low- and high-SES respondents and reveals how general aesthetic preferences shape food ideals. More broadly, this study is important for demonstrating the distinctiveness and meanings of low-SES consumption, as well as shedding light on the relationship between culture and poverty (Small et al., 2010).

Before presenting data supporting our argument, we briefly outline literature concerning the classed dimension of consumption habits, as well as the connection between food and SES.

The complexity of class, consumption, and food tastes

There is a long history of sociological attention to the patterns and logics of classed cultural consumption, from Veblen’s (2007 [1899]) “conspicuous consumption,” to Simmel’s (1957) “trickle down” theory of class emulation. Bourdieu’s (1984) theory

of classed consumption has been particularly influential for consumption research and food scholars alike and serves as an analytic launch pad for our analysis.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) argues that tastes are part of a social system differentiating people by SES. Two Bourdieusian concepts illuminate class taste differences: privileged “tastes of freedom (luxury)” and working-class “tastes of necessity” (Bourdieu, 1984:177–178). Analyzing empirical data from 1960s France, Bourdieu found that tastes of necessity included working-class food preferences for “the heavy, the fat, and the coarse,” while bourgeois foods of “freedom” included “the light, the refined, and the delicate” (Bourdieu, 1984: 185). The upper classes, whose tastes used “stylized forms to deny function” (Bourdieu, 1984: 6), prioritized presentation and style over substance, quality over quantity. While tastes of freedom are rooted in the myriad options available to affluent consumers, tastes of necessity involve a preference for quantity over quality – for “foods that are simultaneously most ‘filling’ and most economical” (Bourdieu, 1984: 177). When food scarcity is an immediate possibility, people not only choose heavier dishes but also greater *amounts*, particularly on special occasions, which “by [their] very rarity . . . [are] associated with the idea of abundance and the suspension of ordinary restrictions” (Bourdieu, 1984: 179). Holt’s (1998) research on cultural capital in the United States found a similar lower class preference for abundance, which in the North American context can take the form of the buffet restaurant (p. 11).

Bourdieu’s empirical findings cannot be simply transposed to contemporary contexts, but an essential insight from his writing remains: consumption is not straightforwardly driven by necessity. A strength of Bourdieusian analysis – and of practice approaches more generally – is a commitment to studying the rich culture underlying consumption choices, and not assuming that income or values dictate consumption choices (see, for example, Warde, 2014). The habitus of marginalized groups is formed in response to economic conditions, and the habitus’ internalized evaluative schemas themselves come to structure tastes, rather than economic conditions alone. This perspective encourages an examination of embodied food experiences such as food cravings and desires, as well as the mundane, routinized ways food ideals are imagined in daily life. These are key insights we build on in our analysis.

While Bourdieu’s analytic focus was on the effects of class position on tastes, recent research has examined the contemporary complexity of classed tastes (see, for example, Lizardo and Skiles, 2012). Much of this research follows Peterson’s (2005) investigations of omnivorous cultural consumption among high-SES groups and his finding that high-status people consume broadly (omnivorously) across lowbrow and highbrow boundaries. Crucially, scholars working in this vein argue that the connections between tastes, identity, and values are influenced by contemporary cultural discourses such as multiculturalism (Bryson, 1996), meritocracy (Johnston and Baumann, 2015), and populism (Ollivier, 2008). In addition to the microsociological effects of individuals’ class position, consumption preferences are also shaped by broad, macrosociological cultural discourses that have

currency in particular times and places. These discourses inform individuals' cultural repertoires.

Cultural repertoires can be conceptualized as “toolkits” of ideas and “strategies of action” (Lamont, 1992, 2000; Swidler, 1986). Just as a musical “set” contains multiple songs, a cultural repertoire contains a collection of habits, routines, and ideas. Studying cultural repertoires allows scholars to understand how consumers from the same group can act differently. For example, not all upper middle-class consumers engage with an ethical eating repertoire; some may prioritize getting the cheapest food possible (Johnston et al., 2011). Analytically, the cultural repertoire concept discourages economic-deterministic approaches and encourages investigations into the broad cultural scripts used to make sense of (and justify) intersectional inequalities (Lamont, 2000). Access to cultural repertoires is shaped by class, but cultural repertoires do not dictate behavior, and repertoires often exist beyond a specific class niche (see, for example, Cairns et al., 2013; Lamont, 2000). To understand low-SES tastes, we suggest that the study of cultural repertoires is a critical, complimentary analytical resource to Bourdieu's “tastes of necessity.”

SES and food choices

Scholars have used survey data to document what foods people have access to and consume. These studies suggest that higher SES groups are less likely to buy energy-dense (high-calorie) foods and more likely to eat whole grains, lean meats, low-fat dairy products, and fruits and vegetables (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008: 1108; Ricciuto and Tarasuk, 2007: 187). In Canada, research has documented a clear, positive, and ongoing relationship between SES, nutrient levels, and higher quality foods (Ricciuto and Tarasuk, 2007: 192–194). A US study on low-SES food consumption found that respondents tended to buy less healthy food (avoiding higher cost healthier foods) and prioritized meat consumption (Alkon et al., 2013). While these trends might appear straightforward, the relationship between SES and food consumption is complex and defies popular stereotypes. For instance, fast food is consumed regularly by people from across the class spectrum in the United States, and in some studies it is *positively* related to income (Dugan, 2013; Kim and Leigh, 2011; Vikraman et al., 2015). While the stereotype of uneducated poor people making unhealthy choices holds considerable sway in the public domain, scholarship shows that the relationship between education and healthy choices is complex; many low-SES people understand the imperatives of healthy food choices even as income constraints restrict these choices (Beagan et al., 2015; Gross and Rosenberger, 2010). Although prior work documents strong SES differences in food choices, the reasons underlying those differences are poorly understood.

We address this gap in the literature by investigating how food tastes differ by SES. While prior work (Johnston and Baumann, 2015) has studied privileged food tastes, less attention has been paid to understanding food tastes among

groups with low economic and cultural capital (cf. Beagan et al., 2015; Bowen et al., 2014; Daniel, 2016). We identify low-SES food tastes in our respondents' answers by capitalizing on two important insights in prior work. First, following Bourdieu, we look for relationships between conditions of economic constraints and aesthetic (food) preferences. Second, following Peterson and others, we examine the interplay between broad cultural discourses and classed consumption preferences.

Data and method

Our analysis is based on data collected from 2008 to 2010 for a cross-Canada study investigating the influence of SES and family context on food practices. Interviews were completed with 254 participants (123 adults and 131 teens) in 105 families¹ in 10 rural and urban locations across Canada. Recruitment occurred through public venues (e.g. newspaper advertisements, online ads), and for a small minority of cases, snowball sampling produced study participants. A stratified quota sampling method was used to attain class and ethnic diversity at each site and in the broad sample. Each family was assigned to one of the following categories: high-SES (35 families), mid-SES (27 families), and low-SES (43 families). The sample reflected the ethno-racial diversity of urban Canada (i.e. urban samples were more diverse than rural) and is roughly aligned with Canadian population demographics (19% of Canadians are a visible minority; Statistics Canada, 2011). Seventy-seven percent of participants identified as White/Euro-Canadian, 6% as First Nations/Aboriginal, 6% as South Asian, 2% as Chinese, and 2% as African-Canadian. The remaining 7% identified with another heritage (e.g. Eritrean, Japanese) or had a mixed background. As for gender, 105 participants were women, 77 were girls, 54 were boys, and 18 were men.² (See Appendix 1 for further details.)

We used interview data to identify patterns in everyday food ideals and also to illuminate the *meaning* of food consumption: why do low-SES interviewees categorize certain foods as desirable? We focused on three interview questions devised to access food ideals: (1) "If you were inviting someone you really wanted to impress for a meal, what would you serve?" (2) "If someone were visiting your area and wanted to know how locals eat, where would you recommend they shop or eat out?" and (3) "How might you eat differently if you had more money?" Why these questions? The first two questions ask respondents to think about relatively rare occasions when the importance of food choices is salient. In contrast to quotidian food choices, making dinners to impress and guide visitors to "good" food are instances when tastes are predominant in making food choices. Additionally, these first two questions focus on social interactions and perceptions, and therefore evoke social issues of identity and self-presentation that are of particular interest to us. Question 3 asks interviewees to think about ideal tastes without the economic constraints that routinely circumscribe their options, allowing for another channel to express preferences and ideals. Each question is relatively open-ended, but

invited reference to specific foods; these foods were compared to determine thematic patterns and class differences.

In the larger interview, subjects were encouraged to discuss food ideals and also to consider how ideals connected to lived experience and restrictions. While we acknowledge that consumers are not always fully conscious of their food choices (see, for example, Wansink and Sobal, 2007), the interview process encouraged dialog on the distance between food ideals and practices, and this context was taken into account in our analysis of the target questions. While an interviewee's response can be seen as a way to present the self in an admirable light, these responses can provide useful clues about the schematic ideals at stake, as well as the subject's "emotional landscape of desire, morality and expectations" (Pugh, 2013: 50).

Interviews were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti. Given the paucity of prior research on the aesthetic food preferences of low-SES people, our analysis was inductive. The authors independently read the answers to the three interview questions and systematically recorded the characteristics and types of food mentioned as well as the reasons provided. We compared observations and through discussion identified emergent themes relating to food preferences and justifications. As motivations for particular food choices were sometimes left unexplained in the excerpts we examined, we studied other sections of the transcript and reviewed the family memos to determine general family food habits.³ The authors then discussed potential themes and narrowed them down according to commonality and analytical robustness. This was an iterative process that involved going back to the transcripts individually and meeting multiple times and ultimately produced the themes we discuss below.

Low-SES food tastes

Prior research on high-SES food tastes has identified authenticity and exoticism as highly valued food ideals (Johnston and Baumann, 2015), yet the first stage of our data analysis revealed that these ideals were relatively minor concerns for low-SES respondents (see Appendix 2). Instead, low-SES respondents reported an alternate set of concerns and tastes when describing their aesthetic food preferences. These tastes are grouped into four categories: (1) tastes of abundance, (2) a taste for corporate brands, (3) a taste for familiar "ethnic" foods, and (4) a taste for "healthy" foods. While the first taste category is strongly aligned with Bourdieu's concept of a taste of necessity, the latter three have a more complex relationship with this concept. We put forward these categories of tastes as part of a conceptual taste typology and not as a descriptive list of each (or every) low-SES consumer's taste preferences. As such, we recognize that a particular respondent may value one taste category more than another, and taste preferences may stand in contradiction (e.g. a taste for corporate foods may not always align with health preferences). This is in keeping with observations about high-status consumption which also exhibits contradictions (e.g. a taste for local foods contradicts a preference for exotic foods). We also recognize that our data cannot provide a comprehensive typology

of all low-SES food preferences. Our findings instead represent the most salient categories that emerged in our data.

A taste for abundance

In keeping with Bourdieu's (1984) work on tastes of necessity and Holt's (1998) research (p. 11), we found a valuation of abundance among low-SES participants in relation to entertaining at home and eating out. Respondents frequently used words such as "huge" and "big" to describe desirable dishes (e.g. a "big ham"). Norah Walters,⁴ a White⁵ low-SES mother, mentioned abundance in terms of quantity and variety. Describing a meal at home to impress a guest, she said,

You'd have bean salads, you'd have garden salads, you'd have pasta salads. You'd have several different types of meat... cooked several different ways. It's just a little bit of everything... kind of like buffet style.

Brenda Voisey, a low-SES mother of Irish heritage, spoke of her entertaining preferences this way: "I like to serve it like a buffet style so people can help themselves... I always like to make lots because I like people to eat lots." All-you-can-eat buffet restaurants were also mentioned as favorites because of variety and quantity. Bai Voung, a low-SES Chinese mother who described normally having a small and sensitive stomach, seemed proud about her ability to "eat lots" on rare buffet visits. She set the scene: "The waitress is looking at us, 'More?' [and] I say, 'Yeah come on bring more... just keep on bringing it'."

Mid- and high-SES participants also wanted to make sure people were well-fed, especially when entertaining, but there was a greater focus on aesthetics than quantity. For example, Tina Payne, a White high-SES participant, said that her family typically serves the same kind of food to guests as they normally eat, but offer a more stylized presentation:

I think what we do differently [for guests] is the presentation. Trent has made these long boards with brass handles... [We'd serve] a special kind of arugula... or I'd probably get those tiny little peppers instead of the regular big bell peppers, and place it differently, asymmetrically.

Here, the *small* size, and therefore, unique appearance, of Tina's "tiny little" peppers made them worthy of guests. Mid-/high-SES participants also spoke about choosing small quantities of high-quality food over larger quantities of less desirable food. This was particularly evident in the talk of participants with a high degree of food knowledge, but limited economic capital. Tandy Price, a mid-SES college student and single mother, said she paid more for local tomatoes, even on a tight budget. In this case, the prioritization of quality over quantity is more deliberate because of financial constraints: "I just didn't buy as many... [I] try to savour a few slices instead of a whole one."

In sum, there was a clear contrast between mid-/high-SES participants and low-SES participants in terms of attention to abundance. While low-SES participants emphasized quantity, size, and variety, particularly for special occasions, mid-/high-SES participants emphasized quality and presentation, even at the expense of quantity. This suggests that low-SES food tastes are to some degree structured by tastes of necessity; in conditions of economic constraint, low-SES consumers exhibit a taste preference for meals that are hearty, ample, and abundant. However, there is more to low-SES food preferences than a valuation of abundance. Below, we present three low-SES food tastes that suggest that the concept of “tastes of necessity” must be geographically and temporally contextualized and that “tastes of luxury” also have a structuring role.

A taste for corporate brands

The second taste we observed among low-SES participants revolves around demand for what we call “corporate brands.” In brief, corporate brands are widely marketed foods mass-produced in a factory or chain restaurant according to rationalization criteria such as efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and predictability (Ritzer, 2004). They are well-known foods made by multinational food chains with large advertising budgets and broad distribution networks. Corporate foods have minimal geographic specificity and are generally ubiquitous; they can be found on highway billboards, television advertisements, big box stores, and fast-food courts. Examples of corporate brands include chain restaurants and food brands such as Subway, Coca-Cola, and Kellogg’s.

There was a noticeable difference in the valuation of corporate brands in our sample. In answer to our query about what they would serve a guest they wanted to impress, virtually no mid-/high-SES participants mentioned corporate brands. In contrast, more than a quarter of low-SES participants did so. For example, Naomi Williamson, a White low-SES mother, said that for an impressive meal, “I’d definitely buy dessert . . . that’s a good way to impress people . . . I would probably go to Dairy Queen or something and get one of the really nice cakes.” Similarly, when asked what side-dish her mother might serve to impress a guest, Nevada Wheeler, a 14-year-old living on social assistance with her mother, said “Some noodly type of thing, some [Knorr/Unilever brand] Sidekick type of thing.” Corporate food was also mentioned by Travis Patterson, a 17-year-old living on social assistance with his grandmother. When describing a meal to impress a guest, he said, “I’d probably go out somewhere . . . Like not to McDonald’s . . . If you want to impress, more classier right? . . . Like Swiss Chalet [a chain rotisserie chicken restaurant] or something.”

The admiration of corporate food brands among low-SES participants stands in stark contrast to the common denigration of corporate foods we encountered among mid-/high-SES participants as part of their valuation of culinary authenticity (Johnston and Baumann, 2015: 68–69). For example, Therese Parsons, a White high-SES mother, described an experience where she cooked for friends who hosted

her out-of-town visit. Below, she explains her disappointment when rummaging through their drawers, referencing the same brand (“Sidekicks”) that Nevada Wheeler considered impressive:

I pull out this drawer and it’s filled with . . . Sidekicks equivalent or you know Knorr béchamel sauce. What is all that?! . . . If I need a béchamel sauce, I will make it [from scratch].

A disdain for corporate foods also came out in mid-/high-SES participant talk about restaurants. Tammy Raikatui, a mid-SES Japanese-Canadian participant, mentioned a general opposition to chain restaurants in her middle-class neighborhood and explained a specific campaign to shut down a local Swiss Chalet because “it was a corporation as opposed to locally owned.” Here, we again see a contrast between SES groups around a particular brand, one that was mentioned by a low-SES respondent as a “classy” place to take someone you want to impress.⁶

Many mid-/high-SES parents mentioned efforts to pass on culinary knowledge to children; the development of cooking skills was framed as a superior alternative to relying on corporate foods (e.g. homemade béchamel sauce vs “Sidekicks”). Corporate foods were often framed as the antithesis of “good taste.” For high-SES parents, especially, we noted a desire not only to teach culinary skills and connoisseurship (as in Holt, 1998: 16) but also to transmit an orientation toward corporate food as *unpalatable*. Therese Parsons, a White, high-SES mother, put it this way:

I don’t think I would get very much satisfaction from throwing fish sticks and McCain [frozen] fries on the table for my kids. I think I would feel like a terrible parent . . . and it would taste crappy also . . . [T]he kids wouldn’t like it [either]. My kids. We’ve worked very hard to expose the kids to good food and show them that it’s not that hard to make.

Therese establishes a symbolic boundary by distinguishing herself from mothers who, according to middle-class parameters about “proper” parenting (Parsons, 2014), do not set a good example and serve frozen fries. We are not suggesting that high-SES participants are more conscientious parents. Rather, it appears that high-SES consumers are more likely to have the time and knowledge to develop food skills,⁷ and they may also have more motivation to do so given the prestige of culinary knowledge in middle-class circles (Johnston and Baumann, 2015; Johnston et al., 2011; Parsons, 2014).

We see these findings as connected to the most significant developments of the past half century in the food system: corporatization, industrialization, industry-concentration, and globalization (e.g. Nestle, 2015; Winson, 2013). This system produces a wide range of relatively low-priced, mass-produced foods, especially compared to artisanal fare. While food costs constitute a relatively low proportion of Canadian consumers’ budgets (about 14%), many low-income consumers face

food insecurity – a condition impacting more than 12% of Canadian households (Tarasuk et al., 2013). It is not surprising then that our lowest income participants often spoke of being limited to cheap, corporate foods. For example, Katherine Keating, a White, low-SES participant, mentioned that the only restaurant she could afford was Kentucky Fried Chicken on Tuesdays when a meal costs two dollars.

Food corporations' large advertising budgets contribute to a familiarity that low-SES participants found important and can also be linked to budget concerns. Naomi Williamson put it simply: "When I go to a restaurant, I wouldn't want to waste my money on something I may not like." She frequented the chain restaurant Swiss Chalet because "you always know what to expect." For low-SES groups, the search for exoticism common in mid-/high-SES groups is risky, even foolhardy. If money is spent on a meal that turns out to be unsatisfying or unpalatable, budgets may not allow a replacement (DeVault, 1991; Stead et al., 2004).

Although higher SES interviewees minimized corporate food consumption in our interviews, we do not want to suggest that they never eat fast food (e.g. Dugan, 2013, Vikraman et al., 2015). However, for lower SES respondents, certain fast-food chains were seen as fancy or "classy" – as in Travis' suggestion above that Swiss Chalet is "classier" than McDonalds. This suggests that certain fast-food chains (e.g. fast-casual chains such as Chipotle) can possess status associations for low-SES groups and are valued because they provide familiar, low-risk options distinguishable from McDonald's value-meals. Indeed, for some low-SES consumers, certain fast-food brands may symbolize inclusion within the cultural mainstream, especially in the face of other indicators of their marginalization.

The low-SES taste for corporate foods suggests a significant intersection with a Bourdieusian "taste of necessity." In addition to being inexpensive and familiar, corporate foods can operate as *desirable* food options for low-SES consumers. Branded corporate foods are not just what poor people can afford; they can be experienced as tasty, enjoyable, predictable, and appropriate for special occasions. In this way, taste and necessity overlap.

A taste for familiar "ethnic" foods

The third taste we observed among low-SES participants revolves around "ethnic foods." The term "ethnic foods" problematically assumes a Euro-Canadian reference point, but is used here because of its widespread place in popular language. Many low-SES participants mentioned an ethnic dish or restaurant⁸ in answer to either or both of our first two target questions and focused primarily on what we call "*familiar ethnic*" foods (in contrast to mid-/high-SES valuation of culinary exoticism). By "*familiar ethnic*" foods, we mean foods from an ethno-cultural context different from a participant's own, but still familiar because (1) they contain ingredients common in the participant's own culinary traditions and/or (2) because the cuisine in question has a well-established presence in Canada and is understood as relatively "normal."⁹ An example of a familiar ethnic food for most of our

participants is Chinese chicken balls.¹⁰ Chinese immigration began in Canada more than 150 years ago, and although the majority of early immigrants were railroad workers, Chinese restaurants began emerging in the early decades of the century and became a mainstay in small and large Canadian centers many generations ago (Cho, 2010: 8). Although Chinese chicken balls are understood as “ethnic,” the ingredients themselves – chicken breast meat breaded with flour – are commonplace in Euro-Canadian cuisine. While Chinese foods such as chicken balls and egg rolls have become familiar and are adapted to mainstream Canadian tastes (Moore, 2007), cuisines associated with ethnic groups that have immigrated relatively recently (e.g. African, South Asian; Statistics Canada, 2001) are generally less familiar.

There was a notable interest among low-SES participants in familiar ethnic foods. The most commonly mentioned ethnic cuisines were Chinese¹¹ and Greek. Both are well-established ethno-cultural groups in the country with relatively large waves of immigration occurring prior to the 1960s (Cho, 2010; Library and Archives Canada, 2014). The cuisines of more recent immigrant groups were much less commonly mentioned. For example, Indian food, which was the third most commonly mentioned cuisine by low-SES participants, received roughly half as many mentions as Chinese and Greek. Thai and Vietnamese cuisine,¹² which received a fair number of mentions among mid-/high-SES groups, were never mentioned by low-SES participants.

The desire for familiarity in ethnic foods was apparent in the talk of low-SES participants, especially those from small cities or rural areas. Cree teenager Arnold Ahenakew from rural Alberta talked about liking a local Chinese restaurant and described the food as “a mix of Chinese, Western-Chinese, and just Western food.” When Nakisha and Nia Hendsbee, two African-Canadian teen sisters from the small city of Halifax, talked about favorite restaurants they described a Chinese restaurant where they ordered dishes such as chicken balls and egg rolls. Kendall Church, a White low-SES mother, recommended visitors to her small Ontario town visit “the Greek restaurant” and try souvlaki, a skewered beef or chicken dish usually served with potatoes, rice, and salad.

Low-SES interest in familiar ethnic foods comes into sharp relief when contrasted with the high- and mid-SES interest in authenticity and exoticism. As mentioned above, high- and mid-SES participants were much more likely to prioritize culinary authenticity and reject ethnic foods perceived as inauthentic. It is not surprising, then, that Brant Fitzgerald, a White high-SES teen, described his family as avoiding “dulled down” ethnic restaurants, with “bland” food that is “made for Canadians.” Similarly, Bette Falcon, a mid-SES mother of Cree and French origins, spoke critically about the “camouflaged” and “Americanized” ethnic food in her rural area. Higher SES participants not only rejected familiar ethnic foods but also emphasized their enjoyment of *unfamiliar* dishes or typically taboo ingredients. Nigel Wood, a Caucasian, high-SES father with French-Canadian roots, described this taste preference explicitly:

The kids, they're complete omnivores like I am. I mean they've done sushi, they've done dim sum. We were eating barbequed chicken feet at the [Chinese] restaurant and

there's no squeamishness. Nallely [daughter] was probably the only kid in the history of [her] school to bring oxtails and sauerkraut in her lunch... I [also once] made homemade haggis [a Scottish organ meat dish].

Like many high-SES participants, Nigel highlighted his family's appreciation for myriad ethnic foods, especially those positioned as *unusual* by virtue of taboo ingredients (e.g. oxtails) or the imagined reaction of others (e.g. squeamishness). This stands in contrast to the low-SES preference for familiar ethnic foods.

What accounts for the low-SES valuation of familiar ethnic foods such as Chinese chicken balls and Greek souvlaki? First, the interest in ethnic foods among low-SES groups is related to globalization and migration patterns, which have influenced culinary repertoires in many countries (e.g. Italian food in the United States and Indian food in the United Kingdom). We see these national cultural repertoires (Lamont, 1992) reflected in our respondents' tastes and expect familiarity with a greater number of ethnic cuisines to expand over time among low-SES consumers. (This expectation relies on the fact that 20% of the Canadian population is foreign born, which is the highest rate among G8 nations; Statistics Canada, 2011.)

The low-SES interest in familiar ethnic foods also appears related to the interplay between material circumstances and taste, as in the case of corporate foods. Like corporate foods, familiar ethnic foods were seen as cost-effective among low-SES participants. This aligns with Canadian research demonstrating that ethnic restaurants (especially those owned by racialized groups) are widely perceived to have low prices (Turgeon and Pastinelli, 2002). In the previous section on corporate foods, we argued that familiarity is prized in low-SES households because budgets do not allow replacement meals if new (unfamiliar) foods are tried but disliked (see Daniel, 2016). This argument can be extended to familiar ethnic foods, which offer familiar favorites (e.g. wonton soup) for minimal cost. For example, to explain why she likes a well-known Chinese-Canadian chain, low-SES participant Trudy Patterson states, "they're a big chain, you know, they're a very popular restaurant, wonderful website, so I just put my trust [in them], you know." When another low-SES participant, Naomi Williamson, was asked whether she would go to a sushi restaurant, she responded,

I'd be afraid of the fish being raw or something weird... When I go to a restaurant... I tend to stick to tried and true, like quesadillas and things that I know I like... because I don't want to ruin my meal.

Yet familiar ethnic foods offer more than a low-risk, low-cost meal. As with corporate foods, when low-SES consumers choose familiar ethnic foods it is not simply an instrumental economic decision. Instead, low-SES consumers have an aesthetic sensibility where these accessible ethnic foods are perceived as pleasurable, fun, tasty, and enjoyable. When Betje Fortuyn, a low-SES mother of Dutch background, was asked for a restaurant recommendation, she offered, "Probably

Sylvano's [a Greek restaurant]...[or] the Chinese [place]... I like the particular taste of the Chinese." Kaycee Chambers, a White, low-SES teen, mentioned "loving" Chinese food because, as she put it: "I get to drown it all in soya sauce!" Ethnic foods also add variety to low-SES diets. Keira Karsten, a White low-SES mother, describes Chinese egg rolls a "fun" alternative to the "very plain Jane [Western]" meals she otherwise made. Choosing ethnic food can demarcate an evening as an "event" and offer a break from routine.

In sum, familiar ethnic meals offer pleasure, leisure, and variety with minimum risk. As with corporate foods, it is not that low-SES participants necessarily sacrifice taste to meet budgets,¹³ but they have a taste for foods they know and can afford. In turn, what low-income consumers know and can afford is influenced by the availability of ethnic restaurants offering dishes familiar to mainstream palates.

A taste for "healthy" foods

In the above sections on corporate and familiar ethnic foods, we argue that low-SES tastes are shaped by cost, availability, and a desire for familiar, predictable foods. In many ways, then, low-SES food tastes are shaped by necessity. However, we also saw evidence that low-SES tastes were not *always* tastes of necessity closely tied to material constraints. Put differently, low-SES participants did not *exclusively* "have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to" (Bourdieu, 1984: 178) and expressed a desire for relatively unattainable "tastes of luxury." This was most apparent when low-SES participants expressed a taste for "healthy" foods¹⁴ – a category often connoted by organics¹⁵ and fresh produce. Health concerns have become paramount food ideals for many people (Beagan et al., 2015; Rozin et al., 1999), although food practices vary considerably. For low-SES participants, healthy eating was a desirable, but often-unattainable way of eating. This came across especially in answers to our third target question: "How might you eat differently if you had more money?" Ardith Elliott, a White, low-SES mother, imagined using a larger food budget this way: "The biggest thing is I'd eat more organic... stuff that was a little more pricey." For Trina Parker, a White low-SES participant living with her granddaughter, she said that if she had more money, "there would certainly be more fruit [and] there would probably be more veggies."

Less often, low-SES participants described their diet as healthy but difficult to sustain. Belinda Veitch, a mother of Scottish and First Nations descent who described her family as "struggling... because I'm on social assistance," spoke at length about the effort her family put into eating "well." Her family hunts, picks, and preserves wild berries, and Belinda spends significant time cooking and baking. Although Belinda saw organic products as healthier and better tasting, she limited organic purchases because "it's just so expensive." Belinda's situation demonstrates that healthy diets were not absolutely out of reach for all low-SES participants, but were seen to involve significant labor and compromise.

Again, a comparison with mid- and high-SES groups is instructive. While mid-/high-SES groups also valued organics and fresh produce, two key differences are

notable. First, higher SES participants generally had access to what they valued. When asked about stores they would recommend to visitors, many mentioned organic or “natural” food stores that they were familiar with. Salads and vegetables were commonly highlighted as an important component of regular family meals, as well as special meals for guests. Second, high-SES interviewees expressed a unique appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of healthy foods. Higher SES participants were much more likely to take artfully composed photographs of healthy foods and describe healthy eating in stylized terms – with what Bourdieu (1984) would call an “aesthetic disposition” (p. 32). For example, Therese Parsons, a White high-SES mother, showed photographs of her local farmers’ market and remarked, “It’s so pretty how they lay it out . . . It looks lovely to me . . . I think the color is great. It kind of looks like a French flag, don’t you think”? In short, while virtually all participants saw healthy eating as an important ideal, high-SES consumers saw these foods as accessible and worthy of aesthetic distinction.

While the valuation of organics and fresh produce among higher SES groups has been documented elsewhere (Inglis et al., 2005; Johnston and Baumann, 2015; Martikainen et al., 2003), the valuation of these foods among our low-SES participants merits some explanation. For one thing, it departs from Bourdieu’s (1984) finding that the working class prefer “the heavy, the fat and the coarse” (p. 185). In addition, this appreciation for healthy foods is not captured in market and health research that suggests that low-SES groups make fewer organic and fresh fruit and vegetable purchases (Martikainen et al., 2003; Ricciuto and Tarasuk, 2007: 192).

Several characteristics of the contemporary foodscape help explain the low-SES taste for health. The first is the explosion of media attention in past decades to the connections between diet, body fat, and disease (Campos et al., 2006; Schlosser, 2001). This has involved significant evangelizing around food habits, from governments increasing healthy eating messages to celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver pledging to “fight obesity with better food” (Jamie Oliver Food Foundation U.S.A., n.d.). This evangelizing frequently targets low-SES groups, who are assumed to need nutrition education (Julier, 2012; Saguy and Gruys, 2010). Past decades have seen an expansion of organic foods at mainstream supermarkets and discount retailers such as Wal-Mart (Harris and Strom, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that most low-SES participants expressed a desire to consume more fresh produce (preferably organic) and assumed healthy eating as a normative practice.

There are a few additional reasons why low-SES households identified healthy eating as a food ideal.¹⁶ Some low-SES participants with health conditions became hyper-aware of the challenge of healthy eating on a limited budget. Tabia Punnu, a low-SES Eritrean immigrant, had a painful liver condition that had led to multiple hospitalizations. Her daughter, Tafari, had serious knee problems her doctor attributed to her weight. Both were advised by healthcare providers to eat more vegetables and fish. After describing her situation, Tabia wiped away tears and offered, “I have to eat a special diet. I can’t afford everything I buy . . . Yeah, it’s hard . . . it’s very expensive.”

Other low-SES participants expressed a general sense of the cultural value and status of healthy eating. When Keran Chambers, a White, low-SES teen, was asked what he might eat if money was no object, he said, “Fancy stuff from a farm or something . . . It seems like unhealthy food is generally cheaper than the healthier stuff. So I would probably start eating healthier.” For Keran, healthy foods seem desirable at least, in part, because they are “fancy” – status-laden and more expensive. Trudy Patterson, a White, low-SES participant, also noted the “caché” of farmers’ markets selling “freshly grown” local produce. The media undoubtedly play a key role propagating a cultural repertoire linking status and healthy/organic/“from-a-farm” type foods (Johnston et al., 2011). Health discourses and discussions of food in popular media are pervasive, and low-SES respondents demonstrate that they are aware that these are foods they “should” be eating.¹⁷ There is, then, a confluence between what low-SES people think they should be eating for health reasons and what they should be eating to demonstrate belonging and cultural worth. Together, these factors underpin a low-SES taste for healthy foods.

Conclusion

This article provides novel findings about the culture of low-SES food tastes. By systematically analyzing a large sample of interviews with diverse consumers, we identify four distinct low-SES taste preferences: (1) abundance, (2) corporate brands, (3) familiar ethnic foods, and (4) healthy foods. The first three categories represent distinct low-SES tastes that were not routinely observed in our mid-/high-SES consumer data. While a taste for health cuts across SES, the mode in which healthy foods are appreciated varied considerably, with low-SES groups seeing healthy foods as existing just out of reach.

We explain low-SES tastes by building on a Bourdieusian approach to habitus and tastes of necessity. A taste for abundance, corporate brands, and familiar ethnic foods all work to constitute an embodied habitus that values and finds pleasure in foods that are low cost and accessible. Our data affirm what Bourdieu (1984: 177) describes as “a virtue made of necessity.” Although Bourdieusian approaches remain deeply relevant, low-SES tastes can be fully explained as tastes of necessity. A fuller explanation requires reference to the broader food system and prominent cultural repertoires. First, a taste for corporate foods emerged within a branded industrialized food system that produces a panoply of tasty, well-marketed foods that are both desired and embodied at the level of taste. It is clear that entire societies have become “‘tuned’ to the taste of industrial food” (Carolan, 2014: 317), yet low-income populations have less opportunities to develop a taste for alternatives. Second, a desire for familiar ethnic foods must be understood with reference to broad patterns of immigration and the specific culinary context where certain immigrant communities offer ubiquitous, low-cost foods that are appealing to risk-averse eaters. Finally, a low-SES taste for healthy foods must be understood in relation to a far-reaching individualizing

neoliberal discourse mandating personal responsibility for health through responsible food choices (Biltekoff, 2013; Cairns and Johnston, 2015).

Theoretically, our findings and arguments speak to central questions in the study of cultural consumption. Specifically, we show how the Bourdieusian perspective emphasizing class position works in concert with what might be called dominant discourses or cultural repertoires. A simple class explanation comes up short. Low-SES respondents' tastes for ubiquitous corporate brands, familiar ethnic foods, and, most obviously, healthy foods are dependent on established cultural repertoires that frame food consumption as a vital channel to health and pleasure, leisure, and belonging. Overall, our research points to ways that structural conditions of poverty and dominant cultural repertoires generate specific classed taste patterns. To the extent that low-SES food tastes are part of a "culture of poverty," we agree with Small et al. (2010) and Warde (2014: 282–283) that cultural tastes cannot be seen as abstract ideals; low-SES tastes develop in conjunction with the structural conditions and inequalities that shape and constrain the choices of poor consumers.

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Notes

1. Here, we do not exploit the comparative adult/teen feature of the larger study, but we did examine the data to affirm that the tastes we identify are consistent for parents and teens alike.
2. The higher proportion of women reflects the greater willingness of women to be interviewed about food and the greater number of single mothers (than fathers) in the population. While this imbalance potentially biases our results toward women's tastes, we found that the low-SES tastes in our findings were expressed by both males and females. Given that we have 72 males in our sample, we feel confident that our analysis speaks to the SES tastes of both males and females.

3. See Appendix 1 for more information on the family memos.
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. We used participants' own ethno-racial descriptors.
6. We acknowledge that mid- and high-SES participants consume corporate foods – something that would be nearly impossible to avoid in a food system dominated by large food transnationals. Corporate foods were referenced in a few higher SES interviews – especially high-status brands – but participants minimized the importance of these foods, especially in the context of entertaining and presenting their best self to others.
7. Scholars have rightly emphasized that food skills go beyond cooking from scratch and that working-class foodways are often denigrated (Short, 2006; Stead et al., 2004). Still, we note that certain food skills can minimize reliance on processed corporate foods – the focus of this section.
8. We coded foods as “ethnic” when they were explicitly labeled “ethnic” by participants, or when participants employed an ethno-cultural adjective that was not their own (e.g. “Indian” food mentioned by White participants).
9. The term “familiar ethnic” exists in relation to the term “exotic,” which grounds our analysis. As mentioned in Appendix 2, “exotic” foods are those that are norm breaking (i.e. from a species or part of an animal typically taboo in an individual’s culture of origin) and/or socially distant (in terms of class or ethno-cultural origin). In contrast, familiar ethnic foods are relatively “non-exotic” by virtue of using non-taboo ingredients and historical familiarity.
10. This dish is widely available in Canada and the United Kingdom, although not in the United States. It is a small piece of chicken that is battered, deep-fried, and served with plum sauce.
11. This finding contrasts with Holt’s (1998) research (p. 13) in the United States; low cultural capital consumers “found comfort in objects [and cuisines] that are familiar” and saw Chinese cuisine as “exotic” and tended to avoid it.
12. Significant Indian, Thai and Vietnamese immigration to Canada occurred much later than it did in the Chinese and Greek cases, with the largest waves of immigration occurring in the past 15–20 years (Joy, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2007a, 2007b).
13. Some low-SES families did sacrifice taste because of cost constraints and food insecurity. Bernadine Field, a White participant living on disability assistance, told us “I like variety, you bet. Which I don’t get. I have to eat peanut butter for a straight week.”
14. We use scare quotes here to indicate the socially constructed, contested nature of the term “healthy” (see Bilttekoff, 2013), but eliminate them subsequently for readability.
15. Some low-SES participants used the term “organic” interchangeably with “healthy.”
16. Links between healthy eating and family health were observed across SES groupings, suggesting that there are similarities in how different SES groups justify a taste for healthy food.
17. Cairns et al. (2013) find that mothers of diverse SES backgrounds value organic and healthy food in their efforts to meet social expectations of good mothering, even if all mothers cannot regularly buy these foods.

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Appendix I

Interviews were held in the following locations: the district of Kent and the city of Vancouver, BC; the town of Athabasca and the city of Edmonton, AB; Prince Edward county and the city of Kingston, ON; Kings county and the city of Halifax, NS; and the two neighborhoods of Parkdale and Riverdale, Toronto, ON.

At least one parent and one teen were interviewed in each family, and each family member was interviewed twice for 1–2 hours each time (although some family members dropped out before the second interview). Usually, interviews were conducted separately with each family member. However, in some cases where multiple children from the same family volunteered for the study, the children were interviewed together. Similarly, from within the small number of cases where more than one adult from a single family volunteered to be interviewed, some of these adults were interviewed together. This produced a total of 421 interviews. After both interviews, a “family memo” was created by the research team, giving an overview of reported family eating patterns and dietary influences.

Participants were categorized as high-SES if they were university educated and worked in professional, managerial, or other high-status white-collar jobs (Lamont, 1992). Those who were lower level managers or administrators, lower status white-collar workers (e.g. non-retail sales), or highly skilled blue-collar workers with incomes that allowed “a comfortable, mainstream lifestyle” were classified as mid-SES (Gilbert, 2008: 230). A designation of low-SES applies to participants who worked in manual or clerical jobs that required low levels of formal training or education. Participants were also placed into the low-SES category if they had precarious work or insecure incomes, or relied on government support that placed them at or below the poverty line. (We used Statistics Canada’s (2012) “Low Income Cut-Off” for each region.) When a mother and father in a

family might have been placed into different SES categories based on occupation, we used the partner with the higher SES to determine the family's category.

Although we looked first to occupation to determine SES, we also attended to each family's situation, reflected in the family memo and transcripts, and made adjustments to SES categorization if necessary. For example, if a family's income was significantly different than the regional average in that SES category, they were moved to a higher or lower category, as appropriate.

See (Beagan et.al. 2014) for a fuller description of the data collection strategy and a discussion of the larger study's aim.

Appendix 2

In Appendix 2, we describe the first stage of data collection and analysis, which is not reported in depth in the main article. Our analysis began with an investigation of whether findings from prior research on high-SES food preferences could be extended to low-SES food preferences. Prior research by Johnston and Baumann (2015) argues that high-SES food preferences are structured according to whether food can be framed as authentic or exotic. Our first analysis of the data, therefore, sought to ascertain whether low-SES people judged food with the same criteria. At this stage, our analysis was primarily deductive as we applied the categories of prior research to our data.

To do this, we focused on participant answers to the following interview questions: (1) "If you were inviting someone you really wanted to impress for a meal, what would you serve?" and (2) "If someone were visiting your area and wanted to know how locals eat, where would you recommend they shop or eat out?"

To conceptualize "authenticity" and "exoticism," we drew on the definitions of high-SES groups themselves from previous research. In interviews with foodies and in gourmet food magazines (Johnston and Baumann, 2015), authentic food was described as food that has at least one of the following criteria: (1) *geographic specificity*: connection to a specific geographic location, (2) *personal connection*: connection to a specific chef or artisan, (3) *tradition/history*: connection to a culinary lineage, (4) *simplicity*: minimal processing or modification, or (5) *ethnic connection*: made or eaten by people from the ethno-cultural tradition from which it

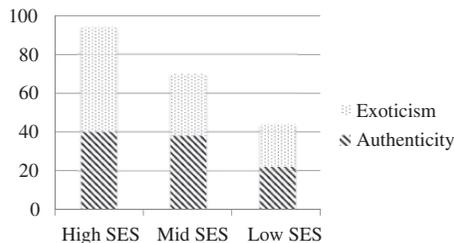


Figure 1. Percent of respondents in each SES group who mentioned at least one dimension of authenticity or exoticism.

arose. Exotic food was spoken of as food that has at least one of the following dimensions: (1) *social distance*: arising from a class or ethno-cultural tradition distant from the eater's own or (2) *norm disruption*: breaking norms or taboos in the eater's culture (e.g. it is relatively norm breaking for a contemporary Euro-North American eater to consume tongue or offal).

To determine attention to authenticity, we conducted a count of participants in each SES group who mentioned at least one of the five dimensions of authenticity in answer to target interview question 1. To establish interest in exoticism, we counted the number of participants in each SES group who mentioned an interest in one or both the dimensions of exoticism in answer to either target question 1 or 2. Whether a food is seen as "exotic" depends on the particular self-positioning of participants, something that is difficult to establish from the outside (e.g. Is Vietnamese food exotic to Chinese participants?). We attempted to address this by relying on participants' own expressions of social distance or norm disruption. For example, we counted as "exotic" food that participants themselves described as "ethnic," "exotic," or "weird," or food that they labeled with an ethno-cultural or class descriptor that was not their own (e.g. "Indian food" mentioned by participants who did not self-describe as Indian; "rich people" food mentioned by low-SES participants).

Figure 1 illustrates the relative valuation of authenticity and exoticism of low-SES interviewees as compared to their high- and mid-SES counterparts. Among high-, mid-, and low-SES participants, 40%, 38%, and 22%, respectively, drew on at least one dimension of authenticity in describing what they would serve to impress someone. In terms of exoticism, the differences were more stark. Among high-, mid-, and low-SES participants, 54%, 32%, and 22%, respectively, mentioned one or both the dimensions of exoticism in describing what they would serve a guest or what restaurants or retailers they would recommend to a visitor.

We also found that high- and mid-SES participants mentioned *several* of the dimensions of either or both authenticity and exoticism in the same answer, while this never happened among low-SES participants. To be specific, 13%, 6%, and 0% of high-, mid-, and low-SES participants, respectively, mentioned more than one criterion of either authenticity or exoticism to describe what they would serve a guest or where they would suggest a visitor eat. High-SES participants mentioned up to four criteria in the same answer and mid-SES participants mentioned up to two criteria.

An illustrative example of a high-SES answer comes from our interview with Brett Vessey, a mother of British heritage. When asked what she would serve a guest she wanted to impress, she said,

Not just a standard western dinner...I'm thinking of Jamie Oliver and his lamb shanks [*1st dimension of authenticity: connection to a renowned chef*]...And [my husband]'s spent the summer...fishing...so we may do a salmon dinner [*2nd dimension of authenticity: simplicity/minimal processing*]. We also have a friend that comes down from [name of a coastal town] and he brings enormous jumbo prawns [*3rd dimension*

of authenticity: geographic specificity]. So, we might do prawns or something on the barbeque. Always accompanied with lots of fresh vegetables and often a salad . . . [L]ast night we made one with halloumi cheese . . . [*1st dimension of exoticism: ethno-cultural distance*] and fresh organic greens and tomatoes, some from our garden, some from local BC [*repeat of 2nd and 3rd dimensions of authenticity: geographic specificity and simplicity*].

Low-SES participants were less likely to refer to authenticity and exoticism, and when they did so they mentioned only one criterion of either authenticity or exoticism at a time. In addition, two dimensions of exoticism and authenticity were *never* mentioned in low-SES responses to the target questions: norm disruption – the interest in species or parts of an animal typically taboo as food in the participant’s culture, and personal connection – the interest in foods from a specific chef or artisan. An illustrative example of a low-SES answer comes from Netty Howell, a mother on social assistance who identified as Caucasian with a British background. This example highlights that although low-SES respondents sometimes made references to a dimension of authenticity, when doing so they only referred to a single dimension of authenticity. When asked what she would serve guests she wanted to impress, she imagined a holiday dinner and emphasized the importance of homemade food:

Well the large family dinners at Christmas are always turkey . . . So it’s turkey and mashed potato and squash and broccoli. And I always make everything from scratch. I make my pumpkin pies from scratch (*2nd dimension of authenticity: simplicity*). I buy pumpkins and cook the pumpkin.

While only 22% of low-SES answers made reference to food authenticity, almost all these references were based on a valuation of homemade or homegrown food. As we demonstrate in our article, however, these numbers leave room for a substantial interest in *processed* foods among *other* low-SES families, which was much less often verbalized by the higher SES groups.

In sum, there was a clear distinction between our low-, mid-, and high-SES groups in the degree to which culinary exoticism and authenticity were valued. This is an important finding in itself, as it suggests that the discourses of authenticity and exoticism, ubiquitous in food writing and middle-class conversation, are not taken up to the same degree by low-SES groups. In addition, it grounds our attention in the main article to which other criteria are valued among low-SES groups. To allow those criteria to emerge from the data, we employed an inductive mode of analysis, which produced the four taste preferences discussed in the main article.