March 26, 2010
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Why does good food taste great?

The good cooks among us know of certain techniques and flavor combinations that produce far superior dishes. These are not just recipes, but certain combinations and methods that increase the many facets of a recipe intern creating great food.

There are two very important properties; Umami and Maillard Reaction that are sort of well known and documented as being important parts of great food. As a cook, one learns techniques that will enhance the flavors of dishes. If this were not the case, everyone would just be boiling stuff and we'd be out of jobs. In the course of things, however we learn to sear, sauté, broil and otherwise bring color to our products imparting rich flavors which set us apart. We learn to combine flavors and use our own special additions so our guests may enjoy their meals.

Most people and most cooks feel that the act of imparting color is simply caramelization or the browning of sugars. People think that the complex flavors we create are just combinations of ingredients. It is not as simple as that. It has been shown scientifically that there are certain absolute reasons why foods react to our culinary techniques, and why food tastes great. Cooks and Scientists have collaborated for many years to understand exactly what is going on.

There are two very important terms to learn: Umami and the Maillard Reaction. Both of which have great influence on the reasons people like our food. When you learn more about both of these terms, you will realize that they are part of the cooking repertoire of every good Chef and that you use these techniques regularly.

In the early 1900's, Japanese scientists worked with cooks on a project to define what was long thought of as a "fifth taste". The classic four tastes are salty, sweet, acid and bitter. This taste was described as "Umami" (pronounced OO-Mommy) and was defined as "deliciousness". Other English translations could be Brothy, Meaty or Savory. Umami as a separate taste was first identified in 1908 by Kikunae Ikeda at Tokyo Imperial University, while researching the strong flavor of seaweed broth. Ikeda isolated Glutamates as the chemical responsible for this strong flavor and began the commercial production of Monosodium Glutamate, MSG. This is a processed chemical compound which can have detrimental effects on one's health.

Good Cooks the world over have known about certain foods enhance the flavors of other food combination and have decried the use of chemical additions. They know these combinations possess much higher powers than can be found in a chemical powder. Since 1908, the types of foods that have high quantities of Glutamates have been codified and a good list of Umami ingredients was created. Here is a short list of some high glutamate ingredients:

- Miso
- Beef Broth
- Sauerkraut
- Parmesan Cheese
- Soy Sauce
- Tomato Ketchup
- Tuna
- Bleu Cheese
- Vegemite *(Australian yeast extract)*
- Anchovy Paste *(see Worcestershire Sauce)*
- Seaweed
- Crimini Mushrooms
- Sweet Potatoes
- Shiitake Mushrooms
- Tomato Juice
- Oysters

When used in certain ways the Glutamates in these foods are released imparting this fifth taste to a dish. There are certain ingredients that good cooks have been using imparting Umami into their foods without recognizing that this is the reason that food tastes better. Worcestershire Sauce, Ketchup, Soy Sauce and Parmesan cheese are used extensively as flavor enhancers. The Umami taste is created in each of these products by the glutamates being freed and enhanced in the cooking and fermentation processes involved in the production of these items.

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