



The Forgotten Fifth Sense

We all know that it's important to incorporate "the five senses" in our descriptive writing. In poems, sensory details make images come alive. In short stories and books, the characters' five senses are what allow us to get lost in the story. But few writers realise which of the five senses they lean on more heavily than others. As a writer, you will have a natural inclination toward one sense over the others. One sense that is often overlooked or undervalued is the sense of taste.

Do not underestimate the power of writing about food in your work. Food is primal. Food is life. By adding descriptions of taste to your scenes or your lines of prose and poetry, you'll deepen the reader's experience of your work.

Don't worry about your readers too much when using taste, after all it's about what the character is going through, their sense of taste and the memories it brings out for him/her. If they love lemon cream pie and it brings out a useful vision or memory that adds to the story, by all means go for it. If they hate lemon cream pie and it causes them to contort their facial features, then use that.

Some Tasty Tips

Mixing up the senses: Consider changing up your descriptions with taste in mind. You know the phrase, “it left a bad taste in my mouth.” Emotions can have a taste. And you can use taste descriptions to tease those emotions out.

Taste as a mirror: If your character is feeling bitter about being cut out of her mother’s will, you might describe the horrible bitter taste of her mother’s homemade asparagus casserole. If your character is feeling excited about watching his daughter in her first school play, you might choose to focus a line or two on the taste and texture of delicious, buttery popcorn. There’s no need to point out the parallels—your reader will pick up the subconscious cues.

Taste as adversary: You can use taste to bring a comic element to a scene or lighten a particularly heavy moment. Perhaps your character is at an important business meeting but has just discovered that the meat served on his dish is not part of his usual gustatory repertoire.

Taste as distraction: If your character is thinking about what he’s eating—or what he would like to be eating, instead of what’s going on right in front of him—that says a lot about his feelings regarding the action.

Taste as nostalgia: We all have memories of particular tastes. Some of these memories conjure specific moments from the past. Perhaps one character longs for her aunt’s famous macaroni and cheese. Another character bites into a bit of pumpkin pie and his thoughts return to a specific Thanksgiving many years ago at which an important family event happened. Taste can be a window into the past—as well as a handy narrative segue.

Taste as absence: A character who cannot taste her food might be having emotional difficulties.

You Are What You Eat (And Your Characters Are What They Eat Too)
Taste can be a great way to invite readers to inhabit the scene or to bring them to a deeper experience of a poem.

So when you’re gathered around the table with family and friends, remember to do more than just eat your food. Remember to pay attention to it. It may pay off in your descriptive writing later on.



Here's a tasting menu of 10 delectable literary meals, a balanced mix of savoury and of sweet, of the humorous, the poignant, and the profound compiled by food writer Diana Secker Tesdell

1. On the Pleasures of the Table by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Long practice has taught me that one pleasure leads to another.

The French epicure who declared: “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are”, was the author of one of the most famous food books ever written, *The Physiology of Taste*. Published in 1825, it includes a delicious account of what he calls “the lengthiest meal I ever ate in my life”. What begins as a breakfast demonstration of his technique for egg-and-cheese fondue turns into an impromptu day-long affair as he presses more and more food on his delighted guests. Brillat-Savarin’s wit and love of life are on full display here, and I challenge any reader to resist coveting his simple yet exquisitely described squares of buttered toast.

2. To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

And she peered into the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats and its bay leaves and its wine, and thought, This will celebrate the occasion – a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival.

The dish in this scene is *Boeuf en Daube*, a French stew that Mrs Ramsay's cook has spent three days preparing. Mrs Ramsay is relieved that the dish is a triumph, its meat tender and its flavours fully melded, but working against its comforting properties are the discordant undercurrents of emotion and conflict that swirl around her table. Woolf mines every detail of the dinner for its deepest significance, but the reader remains grounded; at the centre of all those famously elaborate and luminous streams of consciousness, after all, is a hearty beef stew.

3. Swann's Way by Marcel Proust

I saw her in the back-kitchen which opened on to the courtyard, in process of killing a chicken; by its desperate and quite natural resistance . . . it made the saintly kindness and unction of our servant rather less prominent than it would do, next day at dinner, when it made its appearance in a skin gold-embroidered like a chasuble, and its precious juice was poured out drop by drop as from a pyx.

When one thinks of Proust and food, the first thing that comes to mind is the famously evocative madeleine (revealed this month as recooked: in early drafts it was both honeyed toast and a biscotto) dipped in tea. However, an equally significant moment occurs in the kitchen of Proust's childhood home. The young narrator loves to observe the family cook, Françoise, preparing dinner – he admires the ethereal beauty of the asparagus and the platoons of peas drawn up in orderly ranks – but when he comes down too early one evening he is shocked to discover the cruelty and violence that lie behind the pleasures of the table. Innocence is lost, and it tastes like chicken.

4. The manager of The Kremlin by Evelyn Waugh

Half a minute later he stood on the kerb with exactly three francs in the world. But it had been a magnificent lunch, and he did not regret it.

When a young Russian cadet, a fugitive from the Russian revolution, turns up in Paris with his last 200 francs in his pocket, he grimly assesses his situation. He appears to be facing starvation, and he can either scrape by for another two or three weeks before running out of money – or he can spend it all at once on one last extravagant meal. His choice has unexpected consequences in this short story; perhaps nowhere else in literature has a luncheon of caviar and crepes suzettes so changed the course of a life.

5. Babette's Feast by Isak Dinesen

They promised one another that for their little sisters' sake they would, on the great day, be silent upon all matters of food and drink. Nothing that might be set before them, be it even frogs or snails, should wring a word from their lips.

In Dinesen's marvellous story, a pious sect of 19th-century Norwegians who have renounced the pleasures of the flesh are invited to a meal prepared by a foreign woman who is (unknown to them) the former chef of a famous Parisian restaurant. Babette, once hailed as "the greatest culinary genius of the age," has spent a dozen years in impoverished exile among people who eat only the plainest of fare. Winning a lottery allows her a chance to exercise her artistry one last time - in a sumptuous performance before a comically uncomprehending audience.

6. A Kitchen Allegory by MFK Fisher

As she chopped herbs and sliced asparagus and poured boiling water and added the magic dash of brandy to the mixed soft meat, she kept thinking, but not in a frantic way at all, about never seeing two more people again ... All she wanted to do was make them full of her love, her food, but they could not swallow it.

Pre-eminent food writer MFK Fisher, author of such influential books as Consider the Oyster and The Art of Eating, also wrote fiction. It is ironic that one of her most moving short stories involves a lavish and lovingly described meal of which not a single bite is eaten. A Kitchen Allegory is a heartbreakingly tale of an ageing mother facing the fact that no one needs her any more.

7. The Flounder by Günter Grass

When you are feeling cold inside – try the walls of the cow's second stomach. When you are sad, cast out by all nature, sad unto death, try tripe, which cheers us and gives meaning to life.

Nobel prize-winner Grass's inventive novel ranges across centuries and features a vast array of characters, including a mystical talking fish and a great many cooks. In one scene, a 16th-century abbess finagles the right to cook a last meal for her father before his execution for heresy. She invites the officials responsible for his death sentence; they eagerly accept. The abbess prepares her father's favourite dish – peppery stewed tripe – but takes care to spice it liberally with vengeance.

8. Heartburn by Nora Ephron

If I had it to do over again, I would have made a different kind of pie. The pie I threw at Mark made a terrific mess, but a blueberry pie would have been even better, since it would have permanently ruined his new blazer, the one he bought with Thelma. But Betty said bring a key lime pie, so I did.

This bitingly funny novel about the breakup of a marriage is narrated by Rachel, who writes cookbooks for a living. For my anthology, I selected a section in which Rachel muses about the relationship between potatoes and love. But for an account of a memorable meal, I would instead direct the reader

to an indelible scene late in the novel, when Rachel finally gets up the nerve to confront her philandering husband – in the middle of a dinner party. Her revenge is satisfactorily accompanied by her recipe for key lime pie.

9. Best Quality by Amy Tan

I was not too fond of crab, ever since I saw my birthday crab boiled alive, but I knew I could not refuse. That's the way Chinese mothers show they love their children, not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, duck's gizzards, and crab.

In Amy Tan's story, an American daughter remembers celebrating Chinese New Year with her infuriating immigrant mother and a roomful of relatives. Crabs are served, but so are generous helpings of humiliation, competition, and resentment. It takes a maimed crustacean and a kitchen confrontation to lay bare the nature of her mother's love for her.

10. Sorry Fugu by TC Boyle

She was warm. He was warm. The oven glowed, the grill hissed, the scents of his creations rose about them, ambrosia and manna. ‘Um, good,’ she said.

A merciless food critic meets her match in TC Boyle's comic tour de force. Chef Albert knows he faces certain ruin when he is visited by Willa Frank, who wittily skewers every restaurant she reviews. But Albert finds the way through her stomach to her heart when he manages to lure her into his kitchen. Boyle's story highlights the inherent sensuousness of food and probes the relationship between art and criticism. But what will stay with you are the author's verbal pyrotechnics – which rival Albert's culinary ones – in bursts of seductive, mouthwatering prose.