

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: 32 Philosophy
Title of case study: The objectivity of taste and tasting: the impact of philosophical research on the drinks and food industry and the wider public.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Barry C. Smith's research on 'the objectivity of tastes and tasting', first presented in 2004, has made a substantial and ongoing impact on the food and drinks industry and on public interest in and understanding of the multisensory nature of flavour perception. His defence of the objectivity of taste opened up a new line of interdisciplinary research that has informed the wine industry's work and generated considerable interest among food and drinks critics, journalists, and the public.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Professor Smith's research at Birkbeck on how we perceive flavours made a significant, distinctively philosophical intervention into debate about the objectivity of taste. He organised an international conference to present his research at the School of Advanced Study, University of London, 3rd December 2004. The conference, 'Philosophy and Wine', in which philosophers, winemakers, critics and other wine professionals participated, launched a new field of interdisciplinary research, the Philosophy of Wine.</p> <p>Smith's conference paper 'The Objectivity of Tastes and Tasting' evoked a strong and favourable response from the wine industry and from several wine critics (including Jancis Robinson). The paper rejects the common assumption that tastes are just sensations: it distinguishes the subjective experience of tasting from the objective tastes encountered in a wine. It argues that tasting is a complex experience, and that we can learn to assess the perceptible qualities of a wine by distinguishing perception of objective flavour properties from personal preferences. This paper, along with others presented at the conference <i>Questions of Taste: the Philosophy of Wine</i>, was published in an Oxford University Press volume and by Signal books, thanks to these publishers inviting Smith to produce a book based on the conference (Ref 1). The volume was favourably reviewed in wine magazines and newspapers including the <i>TLS</i> (June 2007) and <i>The New York Times</i> (September 2007), and it featured among Tim Akin's top five wine books of the year in <i>The Observer</i> (Dec 2007). Favourable reviews also appeared in two academic journals—<i>The British Journal of Aesthetics</i> (2008) and <i>Mind</i> (2009). Smith's defence of the objectivity of taste has been picked up by others: it was the subject of chapter 4 of Cain Todd's <i>The Philosophy of Wine</i> (Ashgate 2011), and of articles in the <i>British Journal of Aesthetics</i> 2012, and in <i>The Aesthetics of Wine</i>, eds. D. Burnham and O. Shilleas (Wiley 2012).</p> <p>As Director of the Institute of Philosophy, seconded from Birkbeck since 2008, Smith continued to develop his research in this area, working closely with psychologists and neuroscientists on how interactions between our senses influence flavour perception. He was an invited participant in international conferences of professional chemists and oenologists working in the wine industry, <i>Wine Active Compounds</i>, in Beaune in 2008 and in 2011; and he contributed to the scientific proceedings of both conference (Refs 2 and 3).</p> <p>In 2009 Smith founded the Centre for the Study of the Senses (CenSes) at the Institute of Philosophy with a view to promoting innovative and collaborative research between philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists. In 2012, he contributed to a scientific paper in the journal <i>Food Quality and Preference</i>, and he published a paper in <i>Nature</i> (Ref 4). He has contributed an article on 'Philosophical Perspectives on Taste' for <i>The Encyclopaedia of Mind</i> (Sage January 2013). With co-authors Charles Spence and Mailika Auvray, he has contributed a paper 'Confusing Tastes and Flavours' to <i>Perception and its Modalities</i>, and is sole author of a paper 'The Chemical Senses' in <i>The Oxford Handbook of Perception</i> (both OUP forthcoming).</p> <p>Smith was awarded a British Academy Latin American–Caribbean Link Grant to run two workshops on 'Sensory Exploration and Evaluation of Flavour' in Bogota (attended by 300</p>

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delegates and streamed to a further 3000 internationally) and London (2010-12).

3. References to the research

1. Barry C. Smith, '[The Objectivity of Taste and Tasting](#)' in *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*, ed. Barry C. Smith (Oxford University Press, New York, and Signalbooks, London, 2007) .
2. Barry C. Smith, '[Same Compounds: Different Flavours?](#)', in Proceedings of the Conference *Wine Active Compounds 2008*, ed. David Chassagne (Oenopluria Media 2008).
3. Barry C. Smith, 'The True Taste of a Wine', in Proceedings of the Conference *Wine Active Compounds 2011*, eds. David Chassagne and Regis D. Gougeon (Oenopluria Media 2011).
4. Barry C. Smith '[The Complexities of Flavour](#)', in *Nature* Vol.486, S6, June 2012 .

Grants:

2010: Awarded a British Academy Latin American-Caribbean Link Grant (£17,820) for *Sensory exploration and evaluation: New themes in perception and action* with Universidad Nacional; Colombia.

4. Details of the impact

Professor Smith's paper at the *Philosophy and Wine* conference has had ongoing impact from 2004 to the present. His work challenged the wine industry, and subsequently the food and drinks industries internationally, to develop their understanding of the factors influencing how people taste. It led to his continuing collaboration with neuroscientist Professor Charles Spence who is Director of the Crossmodal Research Laboratory in Oxford. This strong specialist interest has overflowed into public discourse where Professor Smith's research has influenced the media and publishers in the field of food and drink, leading to an increased public understanding of taste and smell, and of flavour and flavour perception.

Food and drinks industries

Evidence of the interest Smith's research has generated in the food and drinks industries is provided by the numerous invitations to speak and requests for advice and consultancy that Smith has received. His research has provided new ways for such industries to connect with their clients and customers:

- Smith has spoken at international science and industry conferences on wine, including
 - the Wine Active Compounds conference for chemists and oenologists in Beaune in 2008 and 2011 (Source 1)
 - the Italian Institute for Wine and Agriculture, in Florence, March 2012 and Treviso, Nov 2012
 - the Wines of Argentina's Cambalache (17–18 April 2013) (source 2)
 - the British Seafood Society's event, *Cockles and Muscles* at the Museum of London at Docklands (18 May 2013) (source 3).
- Smith has been a sensory consultant for Courvoisier (since 2011), Guinness (ongoing), Diageo (2013, ongoing), Mumm and Perrier Jouet (2012), and Douwe Egberts (2012). For Courvoisier, Smith contributed substantially to the development of a short film and related app, 'Le Nez de Courvoisier', which 'reveals' the user's personal taste profiles and helps people understand and choose wines knowledgeably. (Source 4)
- The gourmet restaurant The Fat Duck approached Smith to conduct sensory experiments through CenSes. Heston Blumenthal subsequently accepted an Honorary Doctorate from the School of Advanced Study (10 April 2013). (Source 5)
- The director of elite winemakers Domaine de la Romanee Conti in Burgundy invited Smith to contribute to a volume which formed part of the submission to UNESCO in 2010 to have Les Climats de la Cote d'Or vineyards in France recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Source 6)
- He was commissioned to write an entry on 'Wine and Philosophy' for *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (ed. J. Robinson, 3rd edition, 2006).
- Smith has been invited to contribute articles to a number of specialist journals and books,

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including the influential journal for wine enthusiasts, *The World of Fine Wine* (Issue 21 2008). His chapter from *Questions of Taste* (2007) was discussed in this journal (Issue 26 2009), and generated considerable discussion in subsequent issues (Issues 27, 28, 2009–10). (Source 7)

- Specialist food and drink consultant who established The Champagne Assembly with a prizewinning event in 2010, hosted by Mumm and Perrier-Jouët, invited Professors Smith and Spence to provide an authoritative philosophical and scientific presentation on taste at the second event in 2012. (Source 8)

Media, publishing and public discourse

The initial interview by *The Guardian's* Malcolm Gluck on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme ahead of the 2004 conference led to a review in the *Financial Times* (11 Dec 2004). The interest subsequently generated in the industry and among specialists by Smith's work has fed into broad media interest, evidenced by several commissions and interviews in the period from 2008:

- Smith has written authoritative articles for a range of publications for non-specialists, on the interaction between the senses, including 'The Sensory and the Multisensory' for John Brockman's Edge website, which is also published in *This Will Make You Smarter*, ed. John Brockman (2011, Harper Perennial). (Source 9)
- Several of the food and drinks industry events at which Smith has presented attracted a wide public audience. Over 700 people attended the *Cockles and Mussels* event at Museum of London (2013), and Professor Smith's talk was featured on BBC China.' (Source 3)
- Smith has been involved in presenting his research on a number of widely listened to radio programmes and on the BBC website, including:
 - a four-part radio series, *The Mysteries of the Brain*, for BBC World Service in 2010, which he was commissioned to write and present. The first programme, on language and the senses, featured Heston Blumenthal and was on Radio 4's *Pick of the Week* (26 Sept 2010). The series was hugely successful online with unprecedented interest for a documentary series, reaching BBC World Service's top two ratings slots four weeks in a row. As a result, Smith was asked to talk about this sensory work on Radio 4's *Start the Week* (4 Oct 2010). (Source 10a)
 - Radio 4's *The Food Programme* (17 March 2013) (Source 10b)
 - The World Service's *Health Checks* (28 April 2013) on loss of taste and smell (Source 9c). This led a consultant from James Paget Hospital in Norwich which runs the UK's only Smell and Taste Clinic to contact Smith, and they now collaborate.
 - And further articles on the BBC website (Sources 10d & e)
- Public interest in his work on the objectivity of taste is ongoing. Smith was asked to present his research at a press briefing for the British Science Festival in Aberdeen (June 2012). It has featured in local, national and international media, including the Daily Mail, the Daily and Sunday Telegraph, the BBC World Service Newshour, the BBC website, BBC Cambridgeshire's *The Naked Scientists*, Radio New Zealand, World Radio Switzerland and Newstalk Radio, Eire.
- Francis Percival, chair of London Gastronomy Seminars, invited Smith to help organise a series of public meetings with experts in food and wine. In March 2012, they hosted the launch of *Flavour*, a new BioMed Journal, and the event featured chefs and scientists from Noma in Copenhagen. (Source 11)
- Smith has done several podcast interviews including discussing the impact of recent discoveries in neuroscience on our understanding of the mind and our senses, on the popular website, Philosophy Bites (7 September 2008).
- Under the auspices of CenSes, he has created the London Experimental Oenology Seminars for the public and wine professionals to learn about the latest sensory and chemical science affecting wine making. These popular events, organised approximately six times a year since 2010, attract 20-30 people each time, including: trainee oenologists from England's wine school, Plumton College in Sussex; members of the wine press; and interested enthusiasts.
- He was invited (with Professor Charles Spence) to organise a bespoke session for paying guests at the popular annual event, Cambalache for Wines of Argentina, 17–18 April 2013, the organiser of which has written: 'This incredible session was informative, witty, erudite and

educational. It really added weight to our event and was one of the most talked about and celebrated experiences of the evening by our guests.'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Articles for specialist publications including
 - 'Les Climats de Bourgogne: un assemblage de nature et de connaissances' in *Les Climats du vignoble de Bourgogne comme patrimoine mondial de l'humanité*, ed. J-P Garcia (EUD, 2010)
 - '[Same Compounds: Different Flavours?](#)' Published in *Proceedings of Wine Active Compounds 2008* edited by David Chassagne, Oenopluria Media, 2008, pp.98-102
 - EU Science News about Nature article: 'Can Science Make Food Taste Better' 17/07/12
2. [Wines of Argentina, Cambalache](#), featuring Barry Smith as a guest speaker
3. Adult Events Programme Manager, Museum of London (Testimonial 1: Factual statement). (Also see the [BBC China event](#))
4. Testimonial 2 (factual statement) from the campaign manager for Courvoisier. Also see: Le Nez du Courvoisier video on [YouTube](#) and [App](#)
5. Letter from The Fat Duck can be supplied on request
6. Testimonial 3 (factual statement) from the director and owner of elite winemakers Domaine de la Romanee Conti
7. [World of Fine Wine 21](#); A series of articles in *The World of Fine Wine* starting with '[What Is A Wine Writer?](#)' by Edward Ragg, in issue 26 followed by responsive articles in issues 27, 28, 40 (copies can be supplied on request. The Editor of *World of Fine Wine* will supply testimonial 4 (Contact details).
8. Testimonial 5 (Factual statement) from specialist food and drink consultant, at View Communications, who established '[The Champagne Assembly](#)'
9. Book chapter by Barry Smith: 'The Sensory and the Multisensory' in *This Will Make You Smarter* (New Scientific Concepts to Improve Your Thinking), ed. John Brockman (Harper Perennial, 2011). Also published in [The Edge](#) and [here](#).
10. BBC programmes:
 - a. The [Mysteries of the Brain](#), BBC World Service, September/October, 2010: Its ranking in the worldservice.com top ten stories list since release: 20-26 Sept - No 1; 27 Sept - 3rd Oct - No 1; 4- 10 Oct - No 2; 11- 17 Oct - No 2. After the series concluded interest continued: 18-24 Oct - No 2; 25-31 Oct - No 8; 1-7 Nov - No 5; 8-15 Nov - No 10
 - b. [Food Programme, Our Changing Taste](#), Radio 4, 18/03/2013
 - c. [Health Check: Flavourless](#) BBC World Service, 28/04/2013
 - d. [Why taste is all in the senses](#), by Philippa Roxby 09/12/2012
 - e. [Taste and smell: What is it like to live without them?](#) by Denise Winterman BBC News Magazine 20/06/2013,
11. Launch of [Flavour](#)