A question of taste

A

They’re often green, they can be crunchy, soft, cooked or raw and food experts insist they’re highly beneficial to your health. What are they? Vegetables.

If you’re not entirely convinced by what they say, don’t worry. There’s a good reason for this: according to scientists, young people’s taste buds, the small points on your tongue that detect the taste of food, are not ready for the bitter taste of some vegetables. Our taste buds develop as we get older meaning that we might view cabbage and spinach more favourably, but young people’s mouths prefer sweet food. In fact, it’s not just young people that like sweet-tasting food. Most of us do, just like our prehistoric ancestors. They ate a lot of sweet fruit because it was widely available and easy to notice on trees and bushes, and it was a good source of energy. They also realized that they had to be exceptionally careful with plants that had a bitter taste, since they were often poisonous.
B
So, apart from bitter and sweet, what other tastes can we detect? You might be surprised to learn that our taste buds can only distinguish two more: salty and sour. When we reach our early teens, we start to prefer sour things to sweet things. However, recent studies have shown that girls and boys experience taste in different ways. Girls have more sensitive taste buds and can differentiate flavours more easily, especially sweet and sour, while boys prefer stronger, more extreme flavours.

C
For everyone, though, food has to be wet for it to be tasty. When we smell food, our mouths produce saliva and when we eat it, the saliva transports its taste to our taste buds. Without saliva, some food would have no taste at all. If you dry your tongue with a cloth and then put some food on it, you’ll find it fairly tasteless. Fortunately, our mouths produce enough saliva every year to fill a bath, so it’s unlikely this will ever happen!

D
We don’t just taste with our mouths, we also use our noses! Our nose can detect 10,000 different smells and when food is cooked, it produces aromas that make us hungry. When we put food in our mouths, our taste buds and noses work together to decide what flavour the food has. Have you ever noticed that food which has been cooked doesn’t taste as good when it goes cold? When the cooking smells disappears, so does some of the taste. You can do a simple experiment to test this. Close your eyes and pinch your nose between your fingers. Then ask someone to put a small piece of food in your mouth and try to identify it. Without any smell to help you, it’s somewhat difficult!
E
Finally, the texture of food on our tongue is also important in our perception of its taste. Some people consider slimy, lumpy, thick or creamy foods utterly repulsive, however it tastes. This is because our brain perceives the look or feel of something and sends a message to our tongue telling it not to like that food.

F
So, if you really don’t like the look, feel or taste of those vegetables on your plate, you can now claim that there is a universally accepted scientific explanation for this. However, don’t tell your parents everything that you have read in this article because they might tell you to hold your nose and dry your tongue before serving you a big plate of vegetables!