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Taste knowledge: couscous and the cook's six senses

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In this article, I explore how cooking knowledge is constituted and show that a sense of taste is central to it. Drawing on the thick description of domestic couscous preparation in Marrakech, Morocco, I treat taste both as a multisensory form of knowing that includes a sixth sense, temporality, and as a broader set of values that inform everyday food preparation. The notion of taste knowledge highlights that there is much more to a cook's knowledge than the act of cooking, and that food and the broader environment play an active part in it. Importantly, taste knowledge only fully emerges as an activity in which past, present, and future experiences are evaluated against material and social changes. Finally, taste knowledge shows that phenomenologically inspired research allows an understanding of broader cultural, economic, and political processes and how these shape, and are shaped by, the work of low-income, yet highly knowledgeable, women.

It was a hot afternoon during Ramadan in Aicha's kitchen in the *medina* (old town) of Marrakech, Morocco. Together with her sister-in-law Halima, we prepared snacks for *leftour* (the meal breaking the fast after sunset). Aicha set up a pot of tea. Keen to help, I took a bundle of fresh mint from the fridge and asked, 'How much should I add?' Aicha took the bundle from me and picked the mint leaves herself. She had begun by saying '*sidi chouia* [add a little]', but then explained, 'I have to do it myself, I need to touch it!' She added, pensively,

> You know, this is why the tea turns out with too much or too little sugar: I begin to make it, I know how much sugar I got, but when Halima finishes it, like yesterday, she doesn't know how much sugar is in there and it turns out *messous* [tasteless; here: not sweet enough].

She illustrated by lifting her palm cradling a piece of sugar, 'I have to feel with my own hands [*khassni nhess b l-idiya*] how thick or heavy a piece is. Even if you show me a piece and ask if it's good, I cannot *feel* whether it is right or not'. Other Marrakchi cooks explained this feeling more enigmatically as 'according to taste ['*ala hsab dyel legout*]'.

Soon after, upon the whiff of a smell, Aicha pulled out a pizza from the gas-fired oven. She laughed when I asked her how long it had been baking, 'Ha, how should I know?

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I put it in and took it out again'. Just as she hardly tasted a drink or dish with her tongue to ensure that it would turn out well, she hardly measured time. She added, 'I don't cook things by time!' But she still dished up *leftour* perfectly on time, to the minute: every evening, the moment of breaking the fast, which shifted by a few minutes every day following the lunar calendar, was awaited so impatiently that a delay in serving food would cause unnecessary tensions among everyone who had anticipated this moment for the whole day. Her sense of time was also noticeable in how she stated '*msha l-hal* [it's too late]' earlier that afternoon, when she decided to use a portion of her bread dough for pizza, since she had not had the time to prepare pizza dough early enough for it to rise 'on time'. 'The bread dough occupied the *qesriya* [earthenware plate used for dough kneading] for too long', she concluded. Aicha explained she cooks 'as long as it takes [*dakshi li khass*; literally: what it needs]'.

This vignette stands out from my fieldnotes as it represents a rare moment that verbalizes what is not usually verbalized: how a cook knows. In this article, I seek to explore how cooking knowledge is constituted and, in doing so, show that taste and temporality are central to it. Conceiving of cooking knowledge as taste knowledge allows sense to be made of the related expressions 'according to taste' and 'as long as it takes'. While bodily perception through taste is rarely verbalized, yet central to knowing cooking, taste as social evaluation is often conjured in the context of women's emancipation and serves as a moral compass in times of change. A cook relies on multisensory taste to engage with and evaluate food as it turns into a dish, from raw ingredients to ready meal. When sourcing, processing, preparing, and serving food, she might taste with her tongue but, importantly, will also smell, listen, look at, and touch food. This synaesthetic interaction of the five senses in everyday food practices is also central to experiences of subjectivity and related to broader cultural, economic, and political forces, as Sutton (2010) argues. He treats taste as a starting point for anthropological analysis – a form of 'gustemology'. This notion is useful for studying taste not only as a bodily and multisensory form of knowing, but also as a broader set of values that inform everyday food preparation and help us understand how cooking knowledge is (re)produced in the context of material and social change.

However, neglected in the concept of gustemology is a sense of temporality, which can be dubbed a cook's 'sixth sense', requiring both sensory perception and a more intuitive, extrasensory ability to understand the broader material and social context of cooking. Engaging with food as it transforms for 'as long as it takes' requires attuning to its changing materiality within a given environment, including microclimate, kitchen technologies, and those eating the meal. The sense of temporality joins the other bodily senses. Such a six-dimensional sense of taste only emerges in activity: many cooks only know what to do when they are doing it, as exemplified by Aicha's *leftour* preparations. At the same time, cooking 'as long as it takes' also serves to define a good cook, and, by extension, a good wife and mother. Cultural values of taste are thus also deeply implicated in the temporality of cooking, and particularly so in the context of material and social change. In sum, then, the notion of taste knowledge highlights that there is much more to a cook's knowledge than the mere act of preparing food. It is both an everyday practice and a cultural norm, perception and discernment, individual and social, it unites and divides, and it engages humans and nonhumans. Importantly, taste knowledge is not static: it always links past, present, and future experiences. Yet how it works and constitutes knowledge remains under-explored. As will become evident throughout the text, the notion of taste knowledge showcases how a

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phenomenological attention to intimate bodily sensations and their direct and indirect responses to material and social transformations also helps us to understand broader cultural, economic, and political processes and how these in turn shape, and are shaped by, the work of low-income yet highly knowledgeable women.

Following an introduction to my fieldsite and methodology, I use the thick description of couscous preparation to demonstrate how bodily taste is multisensory. By engaging with the literature on taste as perception and discernment, I then join the individual and social dimensions of taste knowledge. Third, I show how a phenomenologically inspired conception of taste knowledge also needs to account for temporality as a cook's sixth – at once individual and social – sense, significantly extending the notion of gustemology. Finally, such an expanded notion of taste knowledge allows us to understand the (re)production of cooking knowledge in the context of material and social change in Marrakech and beyond.

Living and thinking domestic cooking in Marrakech

By making practice the object of investigation, rather than an explanatory bridge for theory (Harris 2007), methodology is an integral part of theory and representation. Studying domestic cooking knowledge therefore lent itself to a phenomenological approach to sharing the lived experiences of domestic cooks. As Ingold put it: 'We do not have to think the world in order to live in it, but we do have to live in the world in order to think it' (2011 [2000]: 418). To think the Marrakchi world of domestic cooking, I lived with and informally apprenticed myself to three experienced domestic cooks between September 2012 and August 2013, complemented by regular research visits until May 2018.

Marrakchi homes and markets

This article draws on my work with two families. In the summer of 2013, when I lived and worked with her, Aicha was 30 years old and her family consisted of her husband Hassan and their young daughters Zahra and Rita. I had been cooking with Aicha for two months when, during Ramadan, she also enlisted the help of her sister-in-law Halima, who was visiting from rural Morocco along with Aicha's extended family. For this Ramadan, her first as lead cook in her own home, Aicha had stocked up her kitchen with new tools and technologies, such as a gas oven. Before living and working with Aicha's family, I lived and worked with Hajja's family in the autumn of 2012. I had known both families since 2007 and had already established relationships of trust, which facilitated my acceptance into their lives.[1] In between, I worked with Rachida and her family of four, but I will not draw explicitly on her case here. All families belonged to the low-income majority that dominates rapidly urbanizing Morocco, including Marrakech's *medina*, where they all lived at the time.[2] Comparatively well-off, thanks to the financial support of her two unmarried adult sons, 65-year-old Hajja, together with her unmarried 45-year-old daughter Fatimzahra, devoted most of her time to food preparation. Aicha worked part-time as a cleaner and single-handedly managed all domestic and childcare chores, whilst her 40-year old husband ran a family-owned boutique for tourists.

This situated encounter allowed me to explore food preparations from the unique and intimate position of a quasi-family member, though it inevitably affected the material and social dynamics of cooking within each family. Initially, each family was keen to prepare special foods for me despite their limited financial means, but over

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the course of my apprenticeship they soon reverted to their normal food routines, while incorporating my growing competence. Although the routines and constraints differed in each family, they all valued domestic food preparation highly. The women especially made tremendous efforts to prepare what they considered good Moroccan food; typically, they spent four to six hours a day sourcing, processing, and cleaning the unstandardized products that dominate markets and which they preferred, as well as cooking proper or baking, eating and cleaning up. At the same time, since cooking is deeply embedded in everyday life, it cannot be neatly separated from other domestic practices, including childcare and leisure in the form of socializing or watching television.

The ubiquitous presence of food across urban space betrays its importance in everyday life. The smell of roasting meat, the colourful mountains of spices, the hawker's call, and the mingling of bodies in dense markets make Moroccan cuisine tangible even before the first bite is tasted. Food production for the domestic market is dominated by non-industrial agriculture and regional distribution networks, while production for export is highly industrialized (Sippel 2014). Thus, although several supermarkets dot the outskirts and wealthier neighbourhoods of this and other (Newcomb 2017) fast-growing Moroccan cities, they cannot compete in accessibility, price, and freshness with the many formal and informal neighbourhood markets that still define Marrakech's urban landscape. Low-income Marrakchis especially, who do not have the financial and transport means to shop in a supermarket, tend to buy their food daily and in the vicinity of their homes, in largely unstandardized open-air markets (Graf 2016).

Participant perception

By learning to cook from and helping these women and their families in their daily routines, I conducted an anthropology 'from the body' rather than merely participant observation (Wacquant 2004), which is better described as *participant perception*.[3] My own multisensory engagement with food became the methodological and theoretical basis for my understanding of the (re)production of cooking knowledge. As a woman, and because in Morocco many daily practices are gendered, I spent most of my time with other women. Depending on the task I took on, this sometimes meant missing out on certain processes. Furthermore, since bodily practices such as cooking are thoroughly embedded in everyday material and social life, as we shopped, processed, prepared, baked, and ate food together, we also discussed topics as they arose and that mattered to my research participants and their wider social network. In addition, I interviewed or accompanied other experts such as ethnobotanists, chefs, and shopkeepers, as well as friends and acquaintances in Marrakech and beyond. Photography, video, and audio recordings complemented these lived experiences.

Participant perception raises several challenges. As an apprentice ethnographer, everything was new to me when I began fieldwork, whereas for most young Moroccans who had *sensed* food preparation since childhood, preparing food was less new. I was also keener to learn. Not only did my eagerness shorten the time it took to pick up food knowledge, I also spent most of one year in and around food preparation. In contrast, most young women – who were expected to learn cooking in order to become mature women – were usually less actively present when food was being prepared and less keen to learn. Thus, I do not claim to have learned in the same way that other girls and women learn, each with their very own and incommensurable experiences. Rather, I sought to join in a social learning environment (Lave & Wenger 1991), to participate in women's

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practices within a household and community in order to place cooking within daily life in Marrakech. My positionality and learning constitute a means to understand rather than a representative experience (Portisch 2010).

Participant perception also has implications for thinking about and representing research. During fieldwork, it was often impossible to extricate myself from the immediate bodily and emotional experience of cooking within a given material and social environment; as my body ached at the end of a day or my pride suffered injury from reprimand, my mind struggled to express in fieldnotes what had happened. Back home after fieldwork, analysing embodied knowledge is distanced from the lived experience of cooking and threatens the objectification of such subjective experience. At the same time, it still reverberates in my body when writing as much – or as little – as it did while doing. Thus, in writing about cooking, both during and after fieldwork, I inevitably (re-)create sensory engagements and emotions old and new (Retsikas 2008), and by preparing Moroccan dishes for my own family and friends, I constantly re-enact past experiences in the present. While my post-fieldwork endeavour to analyse cooking requires me to step back from the immediate bodily experience of a given field site, multisensory perception cannot be removed from bodily experience; it becomes a part of the ethnographer. Participant perception through living and thinking domestic cooking thus goes beyond what Stoller (1997) calls 'sensuous scholarship': the dialectic between the sensory and the analytical. By acknowledging that we can only know what is opened up to us by our bodily perception and related to our temporally limited experience of a specific corner of the world, theory and method become inseparably bound up in doing and knowing.

Making couscous

One crisp December morning, I returned from shopping in the nearby *suq* (market) and stepped into the warm kitchen.[4] Hajja sat down on her cushion on the tiled floor as I handed her the heavy plastic bags. She quietly inspected what I had bought. Fatimzahra commented from a distance, 'That is not the couscous[5] Hajja wanted'. My heart sank. Hajja remained silent, took a few dry grains of couscous between her right thumb and index finger, rubbed them, and then placed the grains in her palm to look at them, '*Zouin* [good, nice]!' I sighed with relief. When getting up and lifting the bag with the freshly slaughtered chicken, Hajja first grumbled that it felt too big. However, after rinsing it with water and rubbing it with salt and lemon inside and out, she concluded, 'This is a nice chicken'. She sat down on her cushion again and began to peel and then cut carrots, turnips, and white cabbage into quarters over the floor; a small knife in her right and the vegetables in her left hand. Fatimzahra placed the water-filled bottom pot of the *couscoussière*[6] on an individual gas burner on the floor in front of her mother.

As Hajja collected the quartered vegetables in a plastic bowl filled with water, Fatimzahra silently placed the pressure cooker between her mother's feet on the floor and handed her the salted chicken. Hajja placed the entire piece in the cooker and added some vegetable oil. Without getting up, she then reached into the deep shelf on her left for the spices, adding salt, ground black pepper, ground turmeric, and lots of ground ginger. Upon this smell explosion, I remembered the clink-clonk sound of Hajja's rhythmic pounding of spices in her bronze *mehraz* (pestle and mortar) that had echoed musically in the courtyard, waking me up that morning. Less melodiously, Fatimzahra had then ground them fine in her Moulinex blender.

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Once satisfied with the turmeric-yellow colouring of the chicken and the pungent smell of ginger, Hajja took that small knife of hers in her right hand and a large onion in her left, slicing it over the pot with vertical cuts while swiftly turning it with her fingers. With a sweeping horizontal cut, she then severed the tiny pieces and shook them off onto the chicken. Hajja repeated these co-ordinated gestures of both her hands until she held only the stump of the onion and the chicken was covered in finely shredded pieces. She stirred everything and got up to place the pressure cooker on the fire of the main gas hob. Sitting down again, Hajja finally turned her attention to the couscous grains. She emptied the bag containing the grains that I had bought that morning into her beloved fifty-year-old *gsa'a* (large plate used for preparing and serving couscous) made of walnut wood. Perceiving the quantity in the *gsa'a* as too little, she reached into the shelf next to her to see if there was more couscous. 'Ah, these are yellow; *al-'ayalat* [the women]', Hajja exclaimed enigmatically as she added the visibly paler leftover grains to the *gsa'a* while pointing to the couscous I had bought. She enquired, 'Where did you buy this couscous? At Omar's?' 'Yes', I replied. 'It's yellow, because it's made by women in the countryside'. 'By hand?' 'Yes'. 'Is it different?' 'Yes, better'. Suddenly turning dismissive, Hajja added that women who work for wages do not know these things, indirectly referring to women like Aicha, as she often did when she wanted to demonstrate her superior knowledge. 'They study, they work, but they don't know this'.

As she talked, Hajja began to move her hands in opposite circles to mix the two types of grains in the *gsa'a*. Fatimzahra placed a small pot with cold water next to her. Hajja lifted the pot with her right hand and poured some water into the curved palm of her left hand, jerking it up several times to ease the falling water's impact on the grains and evenly distribute the smallest drops. When she had added enough water, she poured a handful of salt over the grains and began the massage. She placed her hands at the top of the *gsa'a* and spread her fingers to pull like a plough through the couscous, forming miniature furrows. When her hands met at the bottom of the plate, she scooped and lifted them both with couscous and rubbed her palms together until the grains had fallen back into the plate. She repeated these gestures until her palms confirmed that the grains had absorbed enough water and any clumps had dissolved.

Meanwhile, Fatimzahra made small incisions into the flank of the chicken with a large knife to see how it was cooking. Hajja got up, looked at the chicken, too, and was prompted to add more turmeric to give it a yet deeper tinge of yellow. She sat down again and, with her joined palms, carefully scooped the first batch of couscous grains into the perforated top of the *couscoussière*, the *keskas*. In that same moment – surprisingly well timed – the bubbly sound of boiling water became audible and Hajja immediately selected and dropped the carrot pieces into the pot opposite her knees on a separate gas burner. She placed the *keskas* on top of that pot, closed the lid and sealed off the invisible gap between the bottom and top pots with a thick cotton ribbon for the steam to penetrate the couscous grains more thoroughly.

After what felt like an indefinite but brief amount of time to me, Hajja unwrapped the ribbon and took the *keskas* to tip the grains into the *gsa'a* between her feet. She repeated her massaging gestures of the grains, now steaming hot, between her seemingly heat-insensitive palms, while adding more water and also olive oil. This time, however, she rubbed the grains between her palms much more gently, as if they had come to life and were sensitive to pressure. She finished her massage once the grains had an evenly shiny surface and scooped them back into the *keskas* for their second of three steaming rounds . . .

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Just before our four lunch guests arrived, Hajja arranged the fluffy grains of couscous into a conical mound on the large *gsa'a* and carefully decorated the centre with the chicken and vegetables. She finished her work by ladling the remaining sauce over the whole dish. As soon as I placed the large plate in the middle of a low table in the courtyard, we all dug our right-hand fingers or our spoons into the shared dish, interrupted only by sipping buttermilk from our accompanying individual bowls.[7] When the last diner finished with the comment '*barak'allahu feek* [God bless you]', Hajja knew her couscous had once more been delicious.

'According to taste': taste knowledge

The anthropology of the senses, or what lately has also been labelled sensory anthropology, has long been arguing that the senses work in collaboration and often synaesthetically, and has contributed to reinstating the so-called lower senses, such as smell and touch, to taste scholarship (Korsmeyer & Sutton 2011; Pink & Howes 2010). Furthermore, speaking of tasting as a sensory method, Mann *et al.* vividly describe how 'there is already tasting going on while my food is still on the plate … As the fingers move, the mouth anticipates… fingers become involved in tasting even before they handle food on a plate: as they chop, as they knead, as they cook' (2011: 232-3). Indeed, the etymology of 'taste', derived from the old French *taster* and Italian *tastare*, refers also to feeling, handling, and touching and suggests a wider, more multisensory connotation compared to the modern English word (Stoller 1989: 23), which chimes with the way Moroccans refer to taste.[8]

When I asked Hajja to explain how she prepared her couscous, I was told that, like all Moroccan dishes, it is prepared 'according to taste'. Rather than the Arabic term *madaq*, taste is called *legout*, derived from the French term for taste (*goût*) as perception and discernment. At times, this phrase referred to the individual taste of a cook and highlighted different cooking styles; at others, it referred to a shared standard of taste and highlighted recognizable practices and rules (Graf & Mescoli 2020). Beyond this expression, taste was rarely invoked verbally. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork a dish was rarely described as delicious or tasty by cooks or diners. If anything, on very rare and intimate occasions, a drink or dish was described as tasteless (*messous*), usually implying a lack of sugar or salt, as in the opening vignette.[9] Moreover, tasting with the tongue (*iduq*) was much less relied upon than I had initially assumed. The more experienced a cook, the less she seemed to taste with her tongue. Rather, a dish would be tasted shortly before serving to ascertain that everything had combined smoothly. Instead, and as Aicha put it in that rare moment described in the introduction, all of a cook's senses contributed to the success of a dish.

Hajja's sensing body tasted the combination of spices when looking at and smelling the braising chicken; she tasted the couscous grains with her hands as she awakened them to life between her moist palms; and she tasted the vegetables as she listened to the boiling water. Along the way, she assessed the transformations of the various ingredients into a meal, starting with feeling the weight of the freshly slaughtered chicken. Hajja corrected her assessment of its weight when she saw and felt the chicken between her fingers as she washed it. She added turmeric upon seeing and smelling the intensity of the spices. More subtly, she adjusted and synchronized several processes by combining her sense of the size of the chicken in the pot with the water set to boil in another and the amount of couscous grains steaming above it. All along, her sense of taste guided her.

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While the bodily senses of the expert cook join forces to produce a synaesthetic perception of taste – to 'hear the smell' of food (Sutton 2014: 1) – which helps one to evaluate and adjust while engaging with food's transformations, the wider material and social environment also informs the taste of a meal. Halima, visiting from the Moroccan countryside, and I, the ethnographer visiting from abroad, were only partially embedded in Aicha's taste environment – which included her husband and children, her Marrakchi friends and neighbours, but also the raw ingredients and the material environment such as her kitchen tools, her home, and the local market – and thus we were less attuned, for example, to what is considered the right amount of sugar in tea. By contrast, belonging to the same taste environment, Hajja and Fatimzahra were able to work jointly towards a certain taste of couscous (see more on this below). Thus, 'according to taste' refers not only to a cook's synaesthetic bodily sense of taste but also to the conditions of its emergence and reception among diners, and points to the broader material and social dimensions of taste.

Seremetakis (1994: 5) invites us to take seriously the Greek term for the senses, *aesthesis*, which means to feel, sense, or understand good and bad, and which makes taste perception inherently evaluative – a method of discernment that is learned and shared, and thus social. As a bodily technique, which Mauss defines as 'the way in which from society to society men [*sic*] know how to use their bodies' (1973 [1935]: 70), taste as a method of discernment builds on both individual and shared experiences and reveals a form of habitus. At the same time, the question is not what marks 'good taste' (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]), including food quality or the pleasure of tasting, which has inspired much ethnographic research (e.g. Mann & Mol 2018; Paxson 2013). Rather, I am interested in how taste *informs* cooking practices as bodily perception and the culturally, economically, and politically shaped ability to evaluate raw ingredients and food in the making. In Marrakech, taste knowledge cannot be reduced to making good food.

Spackman and Lahne (2019) regard sensing as a form of not only affective, but also economic and political labour mobilized through the food system. Tsigkas (2019), who describes tea production in Sri Lanka, and Kantor (2019), focusing on subsistence farming in Bihar, India, show, respectively, that practices of discernment can and should be disentangled from 'good taste' and the implicit social hierarchy of tastes, and that cultivated perception is the preserve not only of professionals or high-class consumers but also of people usually dismissed as unskilled labourers. Like the rural Indian farmers and cooks described by Kantor, Marrakchi cooks rely on their sensory perception to judge food and the broader material environment as they source it, process it, prepare it, and serve it to their families. Unable to grow their own food, they have a bodily engagement that is informed by a long history of urban food insecurity and overall mistrust in national food policies (Graf 2018). For my research participants, who sourced unprocessed foods in largely unstandardized markets, the ability to discern, coupled with sharing information on price, provenance, and quality with family members, friends, and neighbours, was vital to ensuring food safety in everyday cooking (Graf 2016). As evidenced by Hajja's multisensory engagement with couscous, sourcing and processing food – and, by implication, a deep understanding of the Moroccan and global food system – are important processes by which to assess food's quality and safety and they thus constitute a fundamental part of taste knowledge.

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'As long as it takes': temporality as a sixth sense

When a dish turns out well, it is considered to have '*baraka* [God's blessing]', an acknowledgement that the outcome of every cooking endeavour – and the future more generally – is not entirely under the cook's control. Indeed, whether or not humans intervene, food transforms (itself) in multiple ways and in resonance with its environment. A growing body of anthropological work concludes that food can be considered an active collaborator in its transformation into a meal (Janeja 2010; Sutton 2014; Van Daele 2013) and, speaking of cheese making, Paxson (2013) and West (2013) urge us to consider the broader 'ecology of production'.[10] While I mostly concur with this view, I suggest focusing more on *how* a cook engages with food's transformations and knowingly directs its changing materiality towards the desired outcome (cf. Marchand 2010). From such a perspective, Aicha's and Hajja's attunement to food's transformations in a given environment bespeaks a sense of temporality, which joins the other senses to evaluate food as it transforms. A cook's taste knowledge therefore includes a sixth sense.

Phenomenological approaches to time are a useful starting point, since they seek to overcome the artificial boundary between bodily or 'task' and abstract or 'clock' time (Ingold 2011 [2000]: 323). Merleau-Ponty states: 'I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them' (2007 [1945]: 162). Munn stresses that we and our practices are always in time, but that we also 'make time' (1992: 94) through our acts. Speaking of landscapes or the environment, Ingold further argues that

> the rhythms of human activities resonate not only with those of other living things but also with a whole host of other rhythmic phenomena – the cycles of day and night, and of the seasons . . . And we resonate to the cycles of vegetative growth and decay . . . These resonances are embodied (2011 [2000]: 200).

Ingold concludes that the distinction between a bodily sense of time and an abstracted one holds only in theory, whereas everyday practice is marked by a bodily sense of time, or 'task orientation' (2011 [2000]: 332f.).

Although Hodges (2008) criticizes phenomenological accounts of time for their severance from historical time or globalizing processes, this cannot be said of ethnographies of food, especially when shifting attention to temporality. In their attention to the production, distribution, or consumption of 'fast' or 'slow' food, food anthropologists demonstrate historical sensitivity to local and global temporalities (e.g. Mintz 2006). More concretely phenomenological, Abarca argues that temporality is inherent in every meal, and describes how the beauty of a brief meal expresses a 'sense of history' through what she calls 'aesthetics of the moment' (2006: 104). Sutton similarly highlights that perception always involves a 'mixture of tenses and temporalities' (2014: 14), of collective memory and imagination that contribute to embodied sensory experience, the basis of his gustemological approach.[11] These are important points, which I will develop in the next section, but they still do not help us to understand *how* a cook engages with temporality. To fully grasp a cook's knowledge, it is equally important to attend to the multiple temporalities inherent in an activity, which necessarily relates the temporality of cooking to historical and global processes of transformation.

When sourcing, processing, and cooking, a cook combines with and includes food's transformative materiality in a given environment through her six-dimensional

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taste knowledge. Her sense of temporality allows her to intervene (or not) at crucial moments in its transformation. Aicha's *leftour* preparations during Ramadan betray the experienced cook's 'resonance' with food and the wider environment. Preparations usually started three hours before sunset and, although Aicha denied cooking 'by time', under her lead the three of us served the meal to break the fast to the minute. For example, upon slapping the bread dough with her fingers to hear how the leavening worked and thereby assess the transformation of flour, water, and yeast into bread, Aicha concluded that it was too late to start making another dough. Later, she *smelled* when the pizza had baked *enough*. While time is 'made' (Munn 1992: 94) in the activity, temporality is only partially controlled by the cook. Although the cook decides when to start an activity under various external constraints, once the ingredients are combined, the activity assumes its very own temporality in conjunction with the environment – temperature, season, tools – and keeps requiring the cook's intervention at specific intervals under reliance on taste; and then at some point it is done.[12]

Marrakchi cooks explained to me that food transforms in conjunction with much broader and less apparent processes, such as when it was harvested, produced, or processed, how it was transported or stored, from where and how it reached a cook's kitchen. Being part of the same material environment, Aicha collaborated with the partially unpredictable workings of her bread dough, tools, and kitchenspace, and even the broader Moroccan food system, which on that day resulted in using a portion of it for making pizza in time for *leftour*. To a mere observer of routine food preparation, these multiple temporal dimensions of taste are hardly perceptible. When I tried to elicit a verbal commentary on an adjustment, for instance when Hajja added more water to the couscous grains, she matter-of-factly stated 'it needs more', suggesting that food itself determined her adjustments, while, in fact, it was her six-dimensional taste knowledge of the grains in their wider material context that allowed her to perceive and act upon such needs as and when they emerged.

Taste knowledge in times of change

There is another dimension of temporality. Especially in the context of technological change and women's emancipation, temporality also invokes social evaluation. In the literature on food preparation and its reproduction, time is usually considered in relation to convenience. Women who work for a wage but are still in charge of domestic food work are assumed to have less time to prepare food and thus embrace time-saving kitchen technologies and convenience foods such as ready-meals or processed foods (cf. Meah & Watson 2011). With some exceptions (e.g. Adapon 2008; Short 2006; Sutton 2014), the resulting lack of bodily and temporal investment in cooking is often associated with a simplification of domestic cooking, a loss of knowledge, and/or an 'unhealthy' diet (Abarca 2006; de Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998; Mintz 2006; Pilcher 2002). Other studies highlight that 'intelligent' kitchen technologies seen as materializations of modernity, such as thermostats or microwaves that are reputed to 'do it all', still warn cooks in their manuals to check their dishes regularly, assuming they did not do that before (Silva 2000), and thus point to the ongoing importance of a sense of temporality despite the advent of so-called time-saving technologies. Indeed, science and technology scholars show that technological change does not relate to social change in a simple, one-directional way (Wajcman 2015).

What foods, tools, and techniques were kept, altered, adapted, or given up in Marrakech was not so much a matter of more or less time available or of convenience

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foods, as Newcomb (2017) suggests for middle-class Fassis, nor simply a desire for status or participation in modernity as in Beni Mellal (Kapchan 1996), but a careful evaluation through bodily and social taste that cannot be rendered in terms of convenience and modernity. While it is a fact that Moroccan women of all socioeconomic groups increasingly seek to study and earn a wage, and that, concomitantly, modern kitchen technologies and processed foods enter urban Moroccan homes, these changes do not necessarily translate into a loss of sensory knowledge or even of laboriously prepared homemade food – certainly not among the women with whom I conducted research.

Generational change and the reciprocity of taste

In his research on the Greek island of Kalymnos, Sutton (2014: 47) shows how taste is embedded in a specific context of place and culture. Taste – for him especially the flavour of food – unlocks memories, expresses generational changes, and bespeaks a form of 'existential quality', or what kind of person Kalymnians aspire to be in the context of modernization. Hajja's holding on to the *mehraz* coupled with Fatimzahra's Moulinex are similar expressions. Older cooks like Hajja adapted to so-called time-saving technologies in several ways, sometimes *through* another skilled body. Fatimzahra's movements were attuned to Hajja's in her interactions with materials. Her attention was a form of practical mimesis 'based upon a bodily awareness of the other in oneself', which demonstrates not so much 'a reciprocity of viewpoints' but a *reciprocity of taste* based on 'similar kinaesthetic experiences . . . and a similar understanding of the activity' (Gieser 2008: 300). Such reciprocity is based on an embodiment of the same taste environment. For instance, whereas Hajja would have squeezed the hot flesh of the braising chicken between her fingers to feel its readiness, she also trusted Fatimzahra's mediated method of driving a knife into the flesh. Equally, Hajja used to grind each spice by hand with her *mehraz*, and her rhythmic pounding gestures were testament to her bodily memory of that practice. However, during my fieldwork, she only pre-crushed spices and then handed them over to Fatimzahra to finish off the hardest work with the Moulinex, which cuts the spices. Although Hajja insisted on crushing rather than cutting spices to enhance their texture and flavour – similar to the Mexican *metate* (Abarca 2006: 73) – she trusted Fatimzahra's reciprocity of taste when the latter operated the electric blender to achieve a result that did not compromise her taste. More symbolically, in using the *mehraz* and the blender, respectively, Hajja and Fatimzahra both also express who they are in the context of change.

Such technical and existential aspects of taste knowledge are embedded in negotiations of intergenerational power relations. The use of electric appliances, but also cookbooks or online resources, is the result of women's literacy and (partial) financial independence from senior family members, and thus challenges the prevailing patriarchal system based on the dominance of men and seniors (Graf forthcoming). Not only are fathers, brothers, or husbands no longer the only breadwinners and so less influential in decisions over household finances, but senior women, too, lose influence in the domestic context. As the older and more experienced cook, Hajja felt entitled to pass on most menial and tedious tasks, such as cleaning and processing ingredients, to Fatimzahra, who, in turn, could rely on technologies such as the blender to ease her potentially harder but less prestigious work. Although just a small example, the Moulinex shows how kitchen technologies contribute to this intergenerational shift of power by providing especially young female users with alternatives. More importantly,

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as I detail elsewhere (Graf forthcoming), for many young urban women, an independent income and literacy enable them to establish their own household upon marriage and take control of food preparation – traditionally the preserve of senior women. Aicha's wage work, and the financial decision-making it entailed, enabled her to convince her husband to move out of his mother's house into a rented flat. In their own conjugal household, young women like Aicha are promoted to lead cook immediately and compensate for the loss of their mother's or mother-in-law's experience and kitchen work with new kitchen appliances such as blenders and new forms of knowledge in the form of cookbooks or via internet websites or social media on their smartphones. Doing so, they not only gain the freedom to decide what to buy and cook, they also escape the often acutely felt dominance of older women, which is considered much more problematic in everyday life than that of men.

As a result, knowledge flows no longer solely from older generations of cooks to younger ones, but also from younger cooks to older ones, making the sharing of taste truly reciprocal. New technologies and sources of knowledge thus translate not only into freedom from manual oppression in the kitchen (see also Kapchan 1996: 214), but also into a more equal exchange of taste knowledge across generations.

At the same time, while certain tools and techniques, such as processing cereals into couscous grains by hand, were readily given up by older generations in order to save bodily effort and time, others, such as massaging couscous grains, were deemed essential to achieving good taste by most cooks I interviewed. Hajja knew well how to hand-roll wheat into couscous, and preferred its taste, but she admitted that 'it was hard work' and was glad that she could buy pre-processed couscous grains. She acknowledged that younger women no longer knew how to do this nor how to distinguish handmade from pre-processed couscous. At the same time, while these industrially produced couscous grains could be – and in non-Moroccan cooking usually are – soaked in boiling water and ready in five minutes, most Moroccan cooks still massage and steam their couscous grains as described above, a laborious process that takes two to three hours.

Urban women do not give up tools or techniques simply because they take time or because it is hard work. Although time-saving technologies such as pre-processed couscous grains or the pressure cooker are facilitating domestic food work, especially for wage-working women, the temporal investment in food preparations is still widely considered a marker of good taste. Thus, while new technologies offer younger generations the choice to do otherwise and improve their negotiating power in the kitchen and home, so far, they have not fundamentally altered what counts as a proper meal.

Mothers have to be good cooks

The example of couscous suggests that the expressions 'according to taste' and 'as long as it takes' are embedded in a cultural system of values and serve to pass not only bodily but also moral judgement. While an experienced cook's ability to prepare good food was never doubted – a mother and wife simply '*has to be* a good cook', Aicha explained to me – a meal was only considered proper if she also invested bodily effort and time in its preparation. 'As long as it takes' thus also points to a form of social evaluation, and reflects some of the new challenges faced by younger generations of cooks. To illustrate, one day as I was eating lunch with Hajja and Fatimzahra, Aicha rang the door to greet her former neighbours. Aicha explained that she was bringing her daughter to the

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nearby pre-school before going to work herself and just popped in to hear how they were doing. When she left, Fatimzahra exclaimed briskly: 'It's only 1.30 p.m.! How can she be out at this time?!' Hajja answered contemptuously: 'Well, she certainly cannot have made a proper lunch!' I realized only months later, when spending a similar number of hours with Aicha sourcing, processing, and preparing food, how this brief exchange conveyed not only (unfounded) doubts about her motherly care work but also a social evaluation of temporality in cooking, pointing to wage-working women's daily time constraints and struggle to be good mothers and wives.

Most Marrakchi women I interviewed rejected time constraints as an excuse to simplify food preparations or use time-saving technologies if they compromised taste – even if pressed for time themselves. Instead, they tended to criticize women who did not attend to food's needs as it transformed, who did not cook 'as long as it takes'. By extension, not taking the time 'it takes' meant that they were not caring well for their families. Social status and women's self-proclaimed desire to be good wives and mothers continue to be associated with the preparation of time-intensive Moroccan meals such as couscous. This symbolic association has been observed across the food studies literature and links taste and the bodily sense of temporality to broader social values.

Sutton was told by a wage-working woman and domestic cook that 'even if a woman works full-time she will find time to cook . . . because doing cooking in a proper way, one that respects tradition, the senses, and health concerns, takes time' (2014: 171, 173; see also Adapon 2008: 20, 45). What counts as proper food is defined within the broader cultural context and often relates to women's identity. Pilcher (2002) notes how the hard labour and time involved in making tortilla in the Mexican highlands gave women status and identity as well as respect and authority within the family and community. When the *metate*, a special grinding stone for hand-grinding corn flour, was gradually replaced by industrial mills, women were reluctant to accept it, similar to how Hajja holds on to the *mehraz* for pounding spices. In the Chicana literature, Blend (2001) observes how the preparation of tortilla was imbued with symbolic significance through the time and effort put into its making, synonyms of love and care, but also the expression of a shared Mexican culture, and hence marked by a contradiction: hand-grinding corn flour for preparing tortilla is a symbol of cultural resilience in the face of material and social change while also an assertion that time- and work-intensive food preparation is women's task; it empowers and simultaneously oppresses them.

The resulting ambivalence is implicit in Moroccan knowledge reproduction. Like tortilla in Mexico, couscous expresses the tension between what is considered indigenous Moroccan (culinary) identity and the everyday constraints that younger generations of women face. In its preparation, the two temporal dimensions inherent in taste knowledge – bodily and social – come together most clearly. Couscous not only is the dish of the week that evokes Moroccan cuisine in general (Graf & Mescoli 2020), the preparation of which 'makes' a Moroccan wife and mother (cf. Ingold 2011 [2000]: 325), but it also reveals a woman's sense of taste and her time constraints. Couscous is usually prepared by the oldest and most experienced cook in a family, and typically for lunch on Friday, the Muslim day of rest. It is considered the most difficult of regular Moroccan dishes, and its preparation the pinnacle of a cook's knowledge. Of the three cooks I worked with during my fieldwork, only Hajja regularly prepared couscous on Fridays, whereas Aicha's mother-in-law initially sent a plate of

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couscous every Friday as if to express her more senior status despite Aicha and family having moved out. Aicha explained that preparing couscous is considered so arduous and time-consuming because it requires a cook to be 'fully alert' and in continuous bodily engagement with food as it transforms and thus is seen as difficult to make by women who single-handedly manage all domestic chores.[13] Different from usual meal preparations, making couscous requires many small gestures and steps that do not leave time to pursue other domestic tasks in parallel, such as hanging the laundry or changing nappies. Another major challenge in handling couscous lies in handling the grains between steaming rounds and, according to Hajja, this was the reason why couscous required so much experience. While all families I interviewed preferred eating couscous on Fridays, the time and effort it took were sometimes not reconcilable with their carefully calibrated daily routines, pointing to the constraints especially low-income wage-working women experience.[14]

What wage work gains low-income women in negotiating power in domestic matters, it appears to take from their ability to invest 'the time it takes' and, by extension, to be good mothers and wives. Not only do these women have to manage wage work in often precarious employment situations without contracts and social insurance (see also Sadiqi & Ennaji 2006) and have less time for domestic work, they also carry out most domestic work single-handedly, including childcare, without recourse to other women's help, unlike their predecessors in multi-generational households.[15] In contrast to their middle-class counterparts, their wage work allows them neither to employ a domestic worker to do laborious and low-status chores such as cleaning the flat or processing raw ingredients (Montgomery 2019) nor to access convenience foods in supermarkets located mostly in middle- and upper-class suburbs unreachable without a car (Newcomb 2017). In the context of material and social change, only those wealthy and secure enough to afford the whole package of new kitchen technologies, domestic help, and convenience food seem able to live up to the ideal of the caring wife and mother.

However, although low-income women's economic capital does not directly translate into cultural capital as it does for middle-class women, it does not eliminate their desire to prepare good food for their family, as Aicha's case illustrates. Ever since she became a mother, Aicha strove to prepare proper Moroccan food, including making her own bread and serving lunch to her husband and children. Her wage work allowed her to buy more expensive but 'healthy' foods such as fruits, and eventually also a fridge and a gas hob. Although it translated into more domestic work, moving out of her mother-in-law's house a few years later made Aicha her 'own boss' and enabled her to take control of her busy schedule. Indeed, as soon as Aicha could arrange her part-time work around her domestic chores, she started making her own couscous, thereby establishing herself as a good wife and mother. In this context, it is not surprising that although younger generations of urban women have more work and less time, they still strive to engage their multisensory taste in the laborious preparation of food. While these women (un)wittingly upheld, reproduced, and shared those elements of their six-dimensional taste knowledge that were deemed essential to Moroccan cooking and to their social status as wives and mothers, in reproducing taste knowledge through new technologies and knowledge sources, they will in the longer term also contribute to changing the cultural values that sustain it, including who is considered a good cook and mother.

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Conclusion

So how does a cook know, especially in times of change? Taking seriously the vernacular expressions 'according to taste' and 'as long as it takes', and linking them through the notion of taste knowledge, allows us to approach a 'gustemological' understanding of how cooking knowledge is constituted beyond embodiment. Taste knowledge captures the evanescence and incommensurability of bodily ways of knowing, in particular the work of the senses and including temporality, while also speaking to a much broader system of cultural values in the context of women's growing but highly ambivalent desire and need for independence through wage work.

Based on a 'thickly textured' sensory exploration of couscous (cf. Howes in Pink & Howes 2010: 340), I have demonstrated how a cook's bodily sense of taste goes well beyond taste on the tongue and encompasses all bodily senses, including a sixth sense of temporality. Although other studies also show that taste as an ability to discern is social and shared across bodies, including nonhuman agents, my analysis has rather focused on *how* cooks engage with their material and social environment. Engagement with a given taste environment requires a cook's constant attunement to other bodies, things, and processes. This makes taste knowledge and the making of a meal an unpredictable yet highly adaptive activity in which past, present, and future experiences are carefully evaluated against, for instance, changing kitchen technologies and wage-working women's new temporal constraints.

Overall, the notion of taste knowledge shows that phenomenologically inspired research, by attending to intimate bodily sensations and their direct and indirect responses to material and social transformations, also helps us to understand broader cultural, economic, and political processes and how these shape, and are shaped by, the domestic work of low-income yet highly knowledgeable women. Conversely, by attending to the multiple constraints these women face when preparing what they consider good food, this article also argues for a less romanticized view on phenomenologically inspired conceptions of time as embedded in an activity and in harmonic resonance with the environment. The reproduction of taste knowledge and of families is hard work that also requires a cook's skilful navigation and careful (re)shaping of deeply held cultural values and therefore necessarily involves dissonance.

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NOTES

[1] To cover costs arising from my share of electricity, food, and rent, I contributed a monthly sum to both households. These contributions were complemented by regularly buying fruit and other treats for each family.

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[2] Morocco has urbanized rapidly since the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, in the wake of which subsistence farmers especially sent their children to work in the cities (Crawford 2008). All three families I worked with have a migrant background.

[3] In his apprenticeship as a boxer, Wacquant (2004: 4 fn. 3, 11 fn. 16) speaks of his bodily immersion in the field as a form of 'surrender' through 'observant participation'. I concur with his and other apprentice ethnographers' notion of doing and thinking about research as 'from the body', as based on the intimate bodily experience of the anthropologist. However, in the case of cooking, much more so than observation (and imitation), *all* senses matter to learning and understanding. I detail the methodological and theoretical implications of participant perception in a manuscript titled *Moroccan food and families in the making* to be published by Routledge.

[4] Shopping for food in the unstandardized Moroccan markets requires a considerable amount of knowledge (Graf 2016) and usually it is the most experienced cook who shops. As both Hajja and Fatimzahra were limited in their mobility, they embraced the opportunity to teach me to shop in their stead.

[5] The term 'couscous' denotes both the cereal grains themselves and the entire dish, including vegetables and/or meat.

[6] A *couscoussière* is a two-layered pot: the bottom is used to prepare sauces, while the perforated top, or *keskas*, is used to steam couscous grains.

[7] Couscous is the only Moroccan dish that is regularly eaten with cutlery to ease eating the unruly grains. Older Moroccans usually use their hands to squish vegetables with grains to form small balls to be popped into the mouth.

[8] See Mann & Mol (2018) for a critical engagement with the role of language and translation in conveying and analysing research on taste.

[9] In Moroccan homes, there is usually no additional sugar or salt placed on the table. It is considered an insult to the cook to add either once a drink or meal is served.

[10] These arguments are largely based on the works of Bennett (2010) and Latour (2005).

[11] Abarca's (2006) and Sutton's (2014) take on temporality is informed by a broader argument about the aesthetic value of a meal and its relation to personal and collective memories, debunking any division between aesthetic reason and bodily experience or between objective and subjective taste (see also Shapin 2012). This argument paves the way for understanding temporality as both an individual and a shared sense of taste.

[12] Likewise, food's transformation within an environment prompts a cook to begin a task. For instance, in summertime when it gets hot in the kitchen, a cook begins to assemble and knead bread earlier in the morning to prevent the yeast from working too fast.

[13] Seremetakis similarly wrote with respect to Greek cooking that 'the cook "has to be fully alert", because cooking is a sudden awakening of substance and the senses' (1994: 27).

[14] For many wage-working women, its preparation was reserved to Sundays. This shift towards Sundays represents a general temporal shift in Morocco towards a bureaucratic temporality, or Western 'clock' time (Ingold 2011 [2000]: 323), dictated by the operating hours of banks and governmental institutions (see also Graf & Mescoli 2020; Newcomb 2017). However, many low-income families such as Aicha's rely on employment in the informal economy, which follows the more bodily rhythm of daily prayers and culminates on Fridays. In Marrakech's popular neighbourhoods, the temporal shift is therefore only partial and helps explain why lunch, especially on Fridays, remains the most important meal of the day and week for many.

[15] Or, indeed, without men's help. Elsewhere, I compare how Marrakchi women's double burden resembles that of many other women across the globe (Graf forthcoming).

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La connaissance du goût : le couscous et les six sens du cuisinier

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteure explore la manière dont se développe le savoir culinaire et montre que le sens du goût y joue un rôle central. En s'appuyant sur la description détaillée de la préparation du couscous maison à Marrakech, au Maroc, l'auteure traite le goût à la fois sous une forme multisensorielle de connaissance comprenant un sixième sens, la temporalité et un ensemble plus large de valeurs qui nourrit chaque jour la préparation des aliments. La notion de connaissance du goût met en évidence que la connaissance d'une cuisinière va bien au-delà de l'acte de cuisiner, et que la nourriture et l'environnement au sens large y jouent un rôle actif. Il est important de noter que la connaissance du goût n'émerge pleinement que comme une activité dans laquelle les expériences passées, présentes et futures sont évaluées dans le contexte de changements matériels et sociaux. Enfin, la connaissance du goût montre que la recherche inspirée de manière phénoménologique permet de comprendre les processus culturels, économiques et politiques plus larges et la manière dont ils façonnent, et sont façonnés par, le travail de femmes à faible revenu, mais très expérimentées.

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