

# MontclairPatch

February 17, 2013

## **Professor Talk: What Attracts Us to Certain Foods?**

The reasons we eat the foods we do is more complex than we think.

Debra Zellner is a professor of psychology at Montclair State University. She has been conducting research on food and looking at why people are drawn to the foods they eat every day.

Your Montclair Patch editor recently spoke with Zellner about her research.

### **So what kinds of things are seen and unseen things are involved in choosing the foods we eat?**

Zellner: We are born with certain innate taste preferences, specifically sweet and fat tasting foods. These are obviously modifiable.

I have also come across in my research that you get to like certain flavors because they are paired with other flavors that you already enjoy.

For example, we get to like the taste of coffee because it is paired with sweet and fatty things - sugar and cream.

Alcohol is the same way. Alcohol is not generally a very well like flavor; it is very bitter. So when people start drinking alcohol, they usually pair it with something sweet such as sodas, e.g. rum and Cokes.

### **So we can condition ourselves to like certain foods by pairing it with sweet and fatty things?**

Zellner: Correct. You can what is considered a unattractive flavor and you pair it with something good, and you will eventually like it.

### **Is this theory limited to just food?**

Zellner: No. I have done other experiments about the attractiveness of different paintings, birds and female undergraduate photos. How attractive something is depends on what the person doing the judging has seen before.

When it comes to food, what you had before matters.

### **What does something such as color do to the attractiveness of food?**

Zellner: When it comes to beverages, for example, people seem to enjoy drinks that are colored appropriately because it helps them to identify the beverage.

But, strangely, when a beverage is colored, people say it has less flavor when it is compared to the exact same beverage without color. It is counterintuitive.

Colored beverages are perceived to smell stronger. But when people drink it, it tastes weaker. It is what is called a contrast effect, where people are expecting something that is stronger than what they get.

**Do any other things influence how we perceive taste?**

Zellner: How a food is prepared on a plate can have an effect on a food's taste.

We did an experiment where we used the same chicken salad but prepared one neatly on a plate, and the other unbalanced and messy. People tasted both plates said the chicken salad on the neatly prepared plate tasted better, so presentation also matters.

*Zellner is president of the [Eastern Psychological Association](#), and will [participating in a conference](#) in New York at the beginning of March for psychologists about food and food research.*

[View Original Article](#)