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Shrinking portions: Psychologists mine the mind-stomach connection

It doesn't take the keen insight of a Freud or a Jung to understand the popularity of one particular presentation at the Eastern Psychological Association's annual meeting last weekend. All it takes is two magical words: free chocolate.

It was standing-room-only at "When Art Meets Science: Designing Chocolate Confections," presented by Chris Loss, director of menu research and development at the Culinary Institute of America, and top pastry chef Francisco J. Migoya, an associate professor at the Hyde Park, N.Y., school.

At the session, participants sampled three confections. They weren't told what was in the chocolates until after they'd eaten them and completed a brief questionnaire.

One was filled with a traditional chocolate ganache. One tasted very much like a salted caramel, but it was filled with white miso. Another contained blanched, candied and dried black olives. Suspended in a white chocolate mixture, the olives resembled bits of dried fruit — which, in fact, is what they were.

As Loss told the surprised audience, "Flavor is in your head."

That was one takeaway from the meeting, which focused on food and psychology and attracted nearly 3,000 researchers and students to the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. The EPA, the oldest and largest of the country's regional psychological associations, is "not clinical," according to president Debra Zellner, a psychology professor at Montclair State University. "We're an academic organization with more of a research bent." Hence much talk about which foods are "maximally hedonically positive." Translation: yummiest.

Zellner's presidential address explored the question of why we like the foods we like. The first reason: "We're born loving sweet."

But parents needn't despair. Mere exposure also produces liking of foods. "The more you eat something, the more you're going to like it," Zellner says. So if you want your kids to eat something new, insist that they try it — a lot. Five tries may not be enough, but 20 will do the job.

Another tip for parents: Liking is affected by context. For example, if you want your kids to eat a faux chicken tender, serve it up with something even more unappetizing, say canned beets or lima beans. That's called hedonic contrast. Yum-O!

There are also visual aspects to food: Zellner's research with the CIA shows that people are more likely to eat food they'd ordinarily reject, such as brown rice, if it is presented artistically. Instead of presenting a chicken breast, green beans and brown rice as separate elements, slice up the chicken and fan out the slices so they hug a fluffier serving of rice, and decorate the

perimeter of the plate symmetrically with green beans. “Make it beautiful and they’ll like it,” she says.

So does that mean that if the White House chef made broccoli look pretty, George H.W. Bush would have eaten it? Possibly. But if not, Zellner has another suggestion: “Put some cheese on it.”

Call it Rachael Ray’s First Law of Hedonics.

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