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Lisa Abraham: Chew on this: Texture plays a big role in what we're eating

Crack open hard-cooked egg, and reviews might be mixed about how yummy texture is

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Indulge me a moment as a bragging aunt.

My niece, the first-born grandchild in our family, is the perfect combination of brains and beauty.

At 21, she has a 3.9 GPA at a prestigious private college, and a year before her graduation had already secured a position with one of the Big Four accounting firms.

As a family, we couldn't be prouder.

So you can imagine the surprise on Easter Sunday when said niece held up the colored egg with her name on it that marked her place at the dinner table, and asked out loud, "OK, how to I do this?"

She looked across the table to see the bewildered faces of her family.

"How do you do what? Crack an egg?" we inquired.

So after enduring the requisite family laughing and wisecracks: "She's so smart she can't figure out how to break an egg," and, "What do they teach you at that school that you're ready to graduate and don't know how to crack an egg?" and, well, you get the picture.

Then she confessed: "I've never eaten a hard-boiled egg before."

The pride of our family has spent her entire life grossed out by the very thought of a hard-cooked egg and, as we all learned, had simply ignored them. Apparently it was a plate of deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika that she had seen at her great-grandmother's house years earlier that had set her mind against them.

She had chosen this Easter to come out of her shell, as it were.

So yes, she was indeed asking: "How do you crack an egg?"

After receiving some basic cracking instructions, along with advice on the importance of salt and pepper, the entire family watched with bated breath as she took her first bite.

She chewed and after getting about halfway through the bite, proclaimed the yolk "disgusting."

"Eeeww, it's so grainy," she said in horror, picking out the remaining yolk and finishing off the white. "It's the texture," she insisted.

Grainy? I've always thought of cooked egg yolk as creamy, maybe mushy or even chalky, but never grainy.

Skeptics at the table told her the texture issue was baloney (which, for the record, she won't eat either), and others expressed their own texture phobias.

Texture is the reason I avoided mushrooms for the first 25 years of my life.

My early experience with mushrooms was confined to those tiny diced black bits in Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup, which formed the sauce for my mother's tuna noodle casserole.

Each time I'd bite into one of those little squares, I felt as though I was biting down on a piece of human flesh. I liked tuna casserole too much to let the mushrooms stop me, so I would enjoy my dinner, carefully separating the mushrooms into a pile on the side of my plate, stopping only occasionally to spit one out when mushroom would meet molar and I'd have a Hannibal Lecter moment.

Later in life, I discovered a wider variety of mushrooms and after trying enough, learned to appreciate their earthy flavor. But occasionally I still will push them off my pizza when their spongy bite sends chills up my spine.

It is a textural thing for sure.

Despite what my family's skeptics may say, any chef will tell you that texture plays an important role in our eating experience.

It's why chefs work hard to layer not only various flavors, but various textures into a dish. Think of a well-made salad with crisp vegetables, a smooth and creamy dressing and crunchy nuts or croutons on top. That's not by accident, but by design.

Which textures we enjoy and which make us go "Eeweee" is a completely personal thing.

Think nobody likes slimy food? Folks who belly up to the raw bar for oysters will disagree.

Rubbery is no good for chicken, but you'll find plenty of folks who will endure chewiness for sweet, savory fried clams.

Christopher Simons, an assistant professor of food science and technology at Ohio State University, specializes in the sensory science that determines why we like the foods that we do.

When it comes to taste and flavors, food companies will spend a lot of money on such research. But when it comes to texture, the body of knowledge is much smaller, he said.

There are two components involved when we eat something, Simons explained.

The first is the actual perception of what we experience while chewing, which is filtered through our sensory system and will respond to things like touch, temperature and aroma.

This is where we make basic decisions: We like chili peppers because they're hot; we don't like chili peppers because they're hot; or we like the flavor of chili peppers so much that we're willing to put up with the heat, even though it causes us pain.

Simons said this is influenced by our genetics and physiology to a degree. Someone who salivates a lot may experience certain foods as mushy because they have extra saliva in their mouth, while someone who doesn't may find the same food to be pleasant or even dry. Those chili peppers may not be as hot to someone who has a mouth full of saliva as they are to someone with dry mouth.

The second major influence on our eating is the experience and context of the situation, and this part is much more subjective.

When he was younger, Simons and his wife spent some time in France, where they frequently ate picnics of wine and cheese and bread that could have been on a French postcard. When they arrived back in Ohio, Simons was happy to find two bottles of the wine they enjoyed so much in France.

"It was swill," he said.

Their preference for the wine was influenced by the happy, romantic times spent picnicking in France, and when they experienced the wine back home in Ohio, their taste for it had changed.

That's why foods will taste differently depending on the circumstances when we eat them. We may always like a certain food if it is tied to a good memory, or we may associate foods with bad memories and never enjoy them.

Texture may be even more of an innate reaction than taste, Simons said. Slimy food, for example, would be an indication of rawness and our senses may be telling us that it is not safe to eat.

Over time, however, we can train ourselves to like any foods, he explained.

Most folks have a natural aversion to bitter flavors because bitter was an indication of poison and our senses are trained to reject it. That's why most folks don't like coffee or beer when they first try them, Simons explained. But with repeated exposure, we can learn to like bitter, which is why there are so many coffee drinkers and beer drinkers out there.

But those who avoid a food after one bad experience may never learn to enjoy it.

Which is where my niece now finds herself with cooked egg yolks.

Will she overcome her initial aversion and find that she enjoys the flavor more than she dislikes the texture? Or will her mind forever be under the influence of the barrage of Easter Day commentators who had something smart-alecky to say?

Of course, she may follow the path of her 5-year-old cousin, who eschews the yolks for reasons of a completely different color: "Because they're yellow."

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