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Food for Thought

AHI Conference 2011

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Find my notes on the following pages...

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Take a moment to think about your last holiday. Hands up who brought back a souvenir bottle of Ouzo, Retsina, Sangria, Grappa...?

Now keep your hand up if the drink you absolutely adored when you were sitting on the beach in Greece, Spain or Italy tasted pretty hideous back home beside the fire in Perth, Swansea, York! What does this tell us? Some things taste best in the place where they were made! And it also tells us that smells and flavours are inextricably linked with place and time... And to your memories of it.

Now, have a look on your table for Envelope One. Close your eyes and take a good sniff (then pass it on). What does this smell make you think of and how does it make you feel?

[Envelope One contains fresh mint and thyme]

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It reminds me of the cultural exchange trip I took earlier this year to Eastern Turkey. Fresh herbs are a key ingredient of the local cuisine, along with more unusual things like pomegranate molasses and wild pistachios. One sniff of these herbs and I am right back amongst the places and people of that cultural exchange experience.

I have never eaten so well nor been reminded so strongly of the link between food and culture – from wafer-thin pistachio pastries made to eat on your wedding day to colourful strings of dried vegetables for tiding you through the winter.

The trip really got me thinking about the link between food, flavours, cultural experiences and – inevitably – interpretation.

So why are smells and tastes such a powerful trigger for memory?

Additional information


Check out Archnetwork to find out more about getting involved in these European-funded cultural exchange visits (www.archnetwork.co.uk)

Read my report about the visit to Eastern Turkey on my website: www.joscott-heritage.co.uk/news.html

While in Eastern Turkey, we visited cultural heritage sites including Gaziantep's food and cookery museum (www.ipekbilgisayar.com/eng/Gaziantep_Mutfak_Muzesi.aspx) and were fortunate to be in the town when its huge new Zeugma Mosaic Museum opened.

And now for the science bit..

- Smell and taste are interlinked
- The olfactory nerve is linked directly to the parts of the brain responsible for emotions and memory



So why do smells and tastes take us to instantly to a different place and time, or recall a person or a place we thought we'd forgotten?

Smell and taste are closely interlinked. In fact, sensory smell information determines 80 to 90% of our taste experience.

There's a direct connection between the olfactory nerve and the parts of the brain responsible for emotions and memory.

And beyond the pleasure of being instantly transported to another place and time by a smell or taste trigger, there is a practical use for this. If you surround yourself with a particular smell while you are studying, you can use that same smell to help your recall – and scientists have also shown that smelling scents while you are asleep (in REM) can help you retain what you have just learnt – a bonus for those studying for exams!

Additional information

For the proper science, see:

www.macalester.edu/psychology/whathap/UBNRP/Smell/memory.html 'The primary olfactory cortex, in which higher-level processing of olfactory information takes place, forms a direct link with the amygdala and the hippocampus. Only two synapses separate the olfactory nerve from the amygdala, which is involved in experiencing emotion and also in emotional memory (Herz & Engen, 1996). In addition, only three synapses separate the olfactory nerve from the hippocampus, which is implicated in memory, especially working memory and short-term memory. Olfaction is the sensory modality that is physically closest to the limbic system, of which the hippocampus and amygdala are a part, and which is responsible for emotions and memory.'

There's also loads of interesting science at:

www.cf.ac.uk/biosi/staffinfo/jacob/teaching/sensory/olfact1.html and more on using smell for studying and retaining new facts at:

www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/science/09sleep.html

and www.bestcollegesonline.com/blog/2009/02/08/using-smell-to-help-you-study/



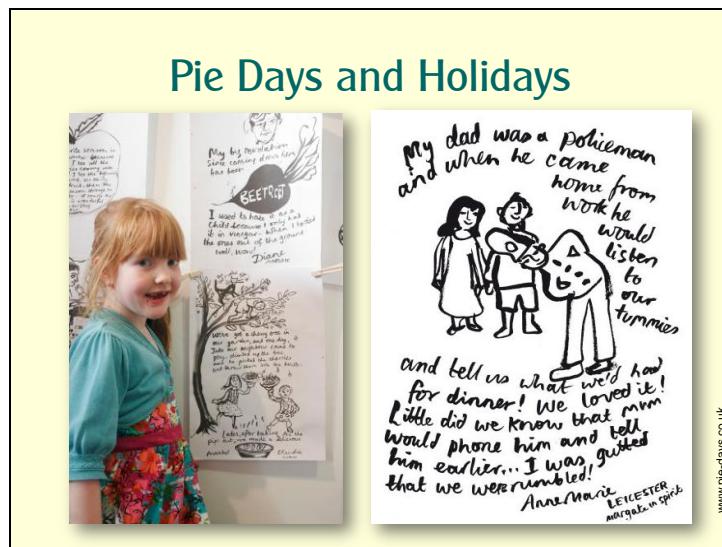
This means that we can use smells and tastes both to trigger old memories and make new ones.

One project that has been using this approach incredibly successfully is one called Let Nature Feed Your Senses. This is an inspiring Big Lottery funded project run in partnership between LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) and The Sensory Trust. The aim is to engage people with nature, food and farming on a network of farms and nature reserves across England, working with people that currently cannot or do not access the countryside because of age, ability or social situation.

These farm visits and cooking sessions have been remarkably successful: helping dementia patients reminisce using sensory stimuli. Farmers are trained to use memory bags at their farm or on an outreach visit, which are full of sensory triggers like foodstuffs and photographs for visiting, reminiscing and – most importantly – creating powerful new memories relating to positive experiences of the countryside.

One special moment was when a 76 year old man who had given up feeding himself helped himself to the freshly made bread & jam! This is powerful stuff...

See www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org



Food is also a great common denominator – a shared experience whatever your age, ability or interest.

Kate Kneale of Marine Studios in Margate wanted to record and celebrate stories from her town. She invited artist Sophie Herxheimer to join her at a series of workshops. Sophie drew the stories as people told them to her, using brush and ink. Each person got a copy of their story to take home, while another copy was placed in a wall of stories. As a result of sharing and reminiscing, people were inspired to go for a picnic or try a forgotten recipe, to cook a meal together or call up an old friend.

The outputs were an entertaining book, an exhibition and a mural along Margate seafront. This was a town with a fragmented population, a mix of locals and new residents, old and young, different faith groups and nationalities – and this project has helped find common ground amongst them, bringing a disparate community together in unexpected ways.

See www.pie-days.co.uk

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But what on earth does this have to do with interpretation during tough economic times? Well, let me make a confession...

I went to the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh the other day. I met friends there for lunch. We stayed for two hours enjoying a gorgeous lunch, then I looked at my watch, realised I had run out of time and had to go home. I barely even made it to the shop.

What did I learn during my visit? Well, the cafe is fantastic. And the table I sat at was made of ash...



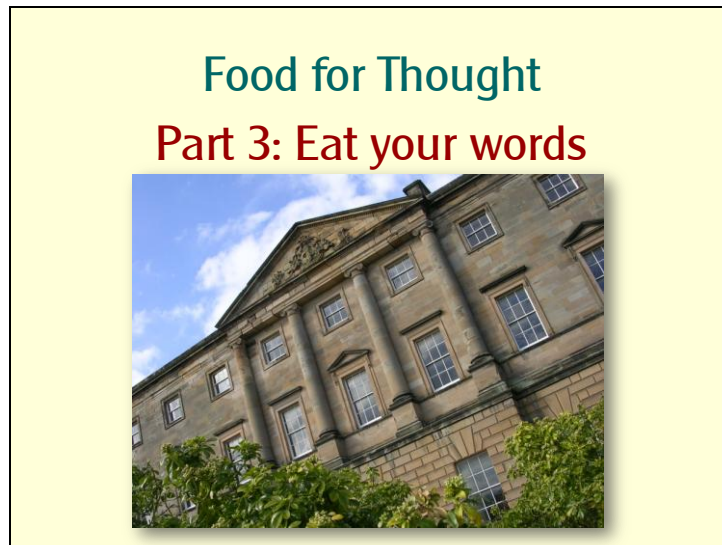
It seems I'm not alone in this experience!

Rob Robinson and I have been working with Forestry Commission Scotland for the last year, looking at the visitor experience at Glenmore Forest Park in the Cairngorms. In particular, the survey work has looked at how people use the visitor centre there. The visitors have been thoroughly surveyed and – guess what – they go to the loo and then spend an awfully long time at the cafe. On average 46 minutes in the cafe, compared to just 18 minutes in the carefully crafted interpretive experience in the next room. They also tend to go to the cafe first.

This does beg the question... why aren't we as interpreters engaging with our visitors where they are spending most of their time and – double whammy – using the smells and tastes that are so effective?

Interestingly there used to be interpretation in the cafe at Glenmore but it has recently been taken out to create a more bistro experience. Is this what visitors are actually looking for when they come to the Cairngorms in Highland Scotland?

Not picking on FC (I simply know many of their sites particularly well), but it was until recently rather similar at Queens View, one of the busiest visitor sites in Scotland, where the old tea room dressed itself up as a Parisian street cafe...



So, tell stories in the places where people are. No brainer.

We can put interpretation in the cafe – not just on the walls but also on the menu, tabletop and napkin (all things I recommend in my interpretive plans but have never actually seen taken forward!) And all of these can be done quite cheaply.

But can't we be cleverer than that? Actually use food and flavours in our interpretation by using recipes and ingredients in our cafes that are intrinsic to our stories? We've just been looking at how smells and tastes make memories, so how can we do more to link the two. This is not rocket science but a great opportunity that could be a cost-effective way of engaging our visitors in the place they already spend the longest. We're feeding them anyway; why not make the food a part of the story...?

Now, have a look on your table for Envelope Two. As before, close your eyes and take a good sniff (then pass it on).
[Envelope Two contains Earl Grey teabags].

I've been doing some work at Howick Hall just down the road from me in Northumberland. It is home of the Grey family, famous for their politics and their tea! This blend of tea was created by a Chinese mandarin, who came to Howick Hall in Northumberland and suggested to Earl Grey that adding oil of bergamot would counterbalance the lime in the water there. The rest – as they say – is history. Except that the Grey family members are still kicking themselves for not patenting the blend...

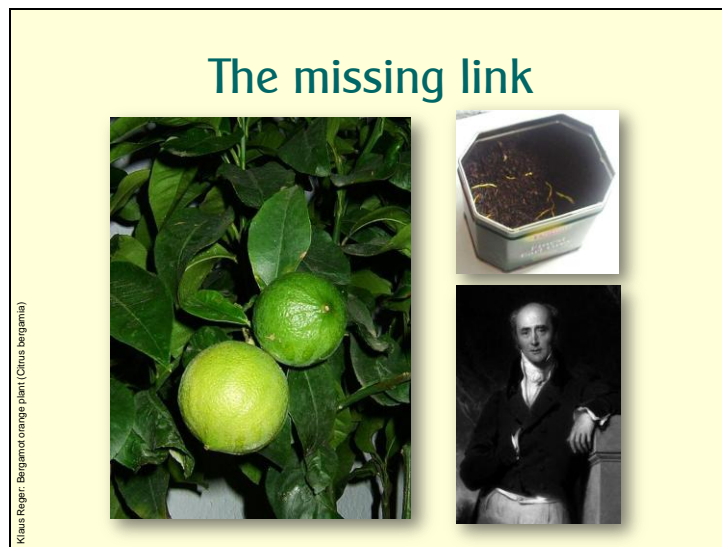
Anyway, the family have designed some very nice interpretation that slips into the menu in the tea room – themed as gossip about the family to share over your tea,

which can be (not surprisingly) Earl Grey. You can also have a slice of tea loaf made with it.

Importantly the tea room, overlooking the gardens, provides exactly the kind of shabby-chic ambience you would expect at such a historic house, with original oil paintings of family members glowering down at you from the walls!

To complete the story, I'd also like to see bergamot grown on site, but I'm still working on that one. Anyone know what bergamot looks like?

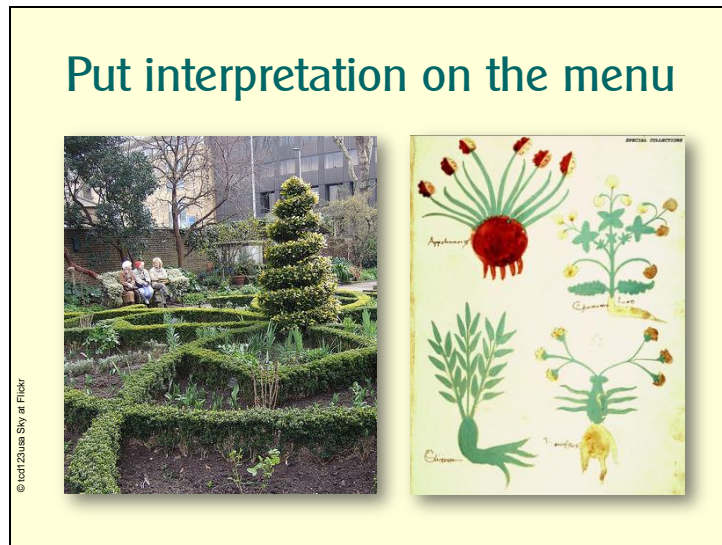
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The bergamot orange from Italy. The oil is taken from the skin.

I'd like to see visitors to Howick Hall going from the cafe in search of this plant in the gardens they have come to visit. After all it is an intrinsic part of the story of the site. Indeed, it is this that links the visitor with the family, the house and the gardens.

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At the Garden Museum in Lambeth, the very popular vegetarian cafe is actually located within the museum building – a deconsecrated church. The cafe smells permeate the exhibition and the buzz of diners is the backdrop to the experience. The herbs and salads on the menu come straight from the museum garden and reflect the changing seasons.

What's more, when I did an exhibition there a few years ago, we featured monastic gardens and medieval herbals. The chef – quite unprompted – immediately included a series of special dishes straight from the medieval cookery books – read about it, see the plants, now eat the meal! The museum literally put interpretation on the menu. Brilliant!

See www.gardenmuseum.org.uk/



Finally, you're all here in Yorkshire having the most amazing discovery and learning experience; so many ideas, sights, experiences and flavours. Which ones are important and how will you ever remember it all? So let's do a little experiment...

Close your eyes for a moment and think about the best bits of the conference so far. Now open your eyes and look at the people around you that have made a difference to this experience. Now also remember that we have spent a considerable amount of time at this conference eating and drinking (where do we spend most of our time during any experience!?)

Now open Container Three, take a long sniff and savour a bite.

This is Yorkshire parkin. If you were paying attention at the quiz last night you'll remember that this is traditionally eaten on Bonfire Night. That's just two weeks away. Savour the flavour of ginger and oats today, buy a packet to take home and eat it on November 5th. Then, if the experiment has worked, you'll be flooded by warm memories of this conference and will remember everything that you learnt. And all for the cost of a packet of parkin.

How's that for cost-effective interpretation...!?

The sweet smell of success

If you want to:

- ✓ **Deliver interpretive messages straight to people's brains**
- ✓ **Stir their emotions**
- ✓ **Create positive experiences**
- ✓ **Be sure they remember them**

I'd just like to leave you with this closing thought: If you want to deliver interpretive messages straight to people's brains, stir their emotions, create positive experiences and, most importantly, be sure they remember them...

The sweet smell of success

A photograph showing a person in a white shirt and dark pants crouching on a purple carpet, looking up at a massive, realistic-looking human nose sculpture. The person is positioned directly in front of the nose, as if to smell it.

Get right up their noses!

...You need to get right up their noses!