

HSS 2018: Technologies of taste

Panelists:

- "Efficiency and Flavor," Victoria Lee, Assistant Professor, Ohio University
- "Smelling Flavor," Ann-Sophie Barwich, postdoc, Columbia University
- "Modeling Flavor," Crystal Lee, PhD Candidate, MIT
- "Removing Flavor," Hannah LeBlanc, PhD Candidate, Stanford University
- "Monitoring Flavor," Christy Spackman, postdoc, Harvey Mudd College

Discussant: Deborah Fitzgerald, MIT

Organizers: Crystal Lee (MIT) and Hannah LeBlanc (Stanford)

Can flavor be measured? This roundtable will trace the quantification, creation, and destruction of flavor by technoscientific institutions like the US military, the flavor industry, and by neuroscientists fixated on understanding how humans taste. Following Steven Shapin's call for increased attention to the history of subjectivity, the panelists show that food and flavor raise important questions about how scientists approach subjective experiences and how historians can write narratives about ephemeral experiences. Beyond its relevance to historians of food, the question of how to understand taste is an interesting case study in the histories of science, sensibility, and material culture.

Ann-Sophie Barwich will look at the key element of flavor, smell, and how its recent neuroscientific study casts doubt on the idea that its perception is merely a matter of subjectivity. Crystal Lee will speak about lexical-gustatory synesthesia to understand changed perceptions of multisensory integration. Victoria Lee will consider Japanese scientists' attempts to rationalize the production of fermented foods, and in particular how notions of efficiency related to flavor. Hannah LeBlanc will discuss Cold War-era fish flour, and American technologists' efforts to extract taste from a food meant to be consumed without eaters' knowledge. Christy Spackman will examine how early twentieth century practices of identifying the "just-noticeable" have come to shape twenty-first century practices of monitoring taint in seafood from oil spills.

Taken together, the speakers show how scientists and technologists have attempted to measure, replicate, and standardize the ephemeral experience of taste. Deborah Fitzgerald will guide the discussion.