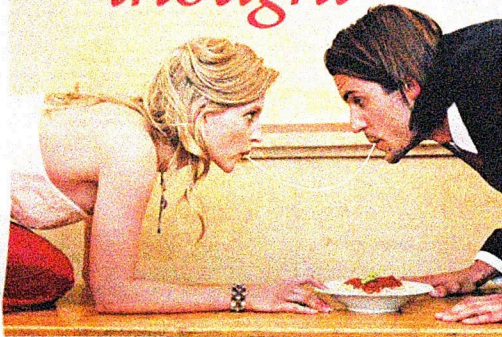


## lifestyle

# Food for thought



What a potential partner wants to eat reveals more than their palate. It can spill their innermost secrets, writes **Denise Cullen**.

**T**he first time you're on a dinner date, pay close attention to what your companion orders. It could tell you a lot about their personality and whether or not you'll be compatible long term, says Alan Hirsch, a US researcher, psychiatrist and founder of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago.

"Noticing your date's preference for spicy food or bland food is a quick way to gather information," Hirsch writes in his book, *What's Your Food Sign?* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang). "If you're dating a commodities trader who always asks for the extra-spicy Italian or Thai dishes, or craves for the hottest salsa, it's very likely that you're falling for a risk-taker," he says.

On the other hand, if your date prefers dishes that feature pensive spices, such as fennel, nutmeg and allspice, they'll probably be charismatic and consider themselves a cut above the rest. "Little annoyances in life bother them, and they often want in lines," Hirsch explains. "Being stuck in traffic with them may be a deal-breaker in a relationship—you may take it in stride, but they take it personally."

## Spice girls

Hot peppers and spices that spill your innermost secrets. Hirsch believes every minor aspect of your food preferences, from whether you like your cheese cubed, sliced or shredded, to your favourite ice-cream flavour (see breakout), can offer revealing insights into your personality type and ideal partner.

Even how vigorously you wield the salt shaker can speak volumes. Hirsch explains that people who like lots of salt have an external locus of control, which means they don't believe they control their own destiny—or health.

"You probably check your horoscope to find out what kind of day you'll have, and rather than making up your own mind, you might follow the crowd when it comes to ideas and opinions," he says. Even more telling than the movie you choose to watch is

the snack food you select to accompany it—from high achieving potato-chip lovers to modest and fumble popcorn eaters. It sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus, but such theories have sound biological underpinnings.

Smell and taste are underrated but crucially important senses to our survival. The individuality of these two senses is obvious in anyone who's ever had a blocked nose from a cold or flu and has discovered that food loses its taste and smell. "Smell and taste are inextricably linked, and are among our instinctive drivers," says Meredith Fuller, a Melbourne-based psychologist.

"If someone doesn't smell right, we don't want to associate with them, and it's most probably because we're not a good match for them from a reproductive point of view."

Such preferences are beyond our conscious control, because the limbic system, which controls feelings of love, including sexual desire, is located in the old reptilian part of our brain.

"Some people smell revolting to us, and it's not their body odour, but a warning system that we aren't compatible," Fuller says. Yet she says our modern obsessions with cleanliness and hairlessness have disconnected us from our pheromones and warped our primitive instincts. "The Brazilian fetish has us clean-shaven to within an inch of our lives and we're no longer eating around naked and cooing... so it's almost as if the food you're drawn to is a secondary game."

## Enigmatic senses

Hirsch's research arose out of the observation that people who lose their sense of smell (often as a result of a head injury) often show a change in personality as well as food preferences.

"Another researcher, Canadian Rachel Herz, a world expert on the psychology of smell, adds that the loss of these vital abilities

## Sweet tooth

Ice-cream is an ideal food sign because of its whimsical, emotional qualities. Flavourful flavours are so revealing that couples should consider meeting in ice-cream parlours rather than cocktail bars, says US researcher Alan Hirsch in *What's Your Food Sign?* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang). Here's what he has to say about what ticks your taste buds:

- **Vanilla** You're colourful, impulsive and suggestible. A private person who enjoys close relationships with others, you're likely to enjoy soap operas and romantic novels.
- **Double chocolate chunk** You're charming, flirtatious and seductive. A novelty seeker, you get bored easily. An intuitive person, you tend to play hunches rather than making on logic.
- **Strawberries and cream** An introvert, you don't handle the stresses of life well. Others can make you feel guilty, and you become irritable and cranky easily.
- **Chocolate chip** You're ambitious, with a competitive streak that leads others to call you a go-getter. You're charming and enjoy being admired.
- **Butter pecan** You're principled, intelligent, conscientious and is perfectionist. When you play a game or sport, you show an aggressive, competitive side and are quick to berate yourself.
- **Strawberry** You're content to be a follower rather than a leader and are happy working behind the scenes. You don't fall head-over-heels in love at first sight, but you're loyal and supportive when committed.
- **Coffee** You live life with gusto. You throw yourself headfirst into everything, so you sometimes find yourself over-committed. The opposite sex find you appealing.
- **Rosy red** You're engaging in social situations, but aggressive and goal-directed at the office. You tend to be cynical and are known to lose your temper when faced with inconveniences.



“Smell and taste are underrated but crucially important senses to our survival”

can cast the world in a very different light. In her book, *The Scent of Desire* (HarperCollins), she argues the case that one of the pre-pioneering events which led to the suicide of INXS lead singer Michael Hutchence in 1997 was a traffic accident five years previously, in which he had suffered a fractured skull which robbed him of his sense of smell.

Deepening depression followed but on the heels of Hutchence's malaise that lascivious pleasures were forever altered for him. One of Hutchence's friends reported that he had broken down in his arms, and said: "I can't even taste my girlfriend anymore."

"Without the sense of smell, the temptations of food, the essence of a walk on the beach, the feeling of nostalgia—the texture of life itself—were robbed from him," she writes.

## Flavour patterns

Our flavour preferences are formed early on. Hirsch, for instance, claims ice-cream preferences are set from around seven years of age.

But some preferences are set even earlier, such that several studies have shown that what a mother consumes while she is pregnant will influence the foods her baby likes to eat after he or she is born.

Similarly, breastfeeding can influence the development of flavour preferences, including for health foods, Herz notes.

"Mothers who drink carrot juice while breastfeeding had infants who liked carrot flavour when later exposed to a 'baby food' much more than infants who did not have this early exposure," she writes.

Herz also speculates that food cravings may be the primal source for all cravings, including lust. "The joy of food is the basis of all our pleasures."