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Notes on "Taste"

May 2, 2022 — by Brie Wolfson



Gertrude Stein's home. [A black and white photograph of a room with table, and a wood



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Taste is a word I've been hearing a lot more lately, and I think it's because we've broadened its application from the world of the aesthetic to the world of the practical. Taste has historically been reserved for conversation about things like fashion and art. Now, we look for it in our social media feeds, the

technology we use, the company we keep, and the people we hire.

When I ask people what they mean by “taste,” they’ll stumble around for a bit and eventually land on something like “you know it when you see it,” or “it’s in the eye of the beholder.” I understand. Words like taste are hard to pin down, perhaps because they describe a sensibility more than any particular quality, a particular thing. We’re inclined to leave them unencumbered by a definition, to preserve their ability to shift shapes.

But I don’t think we have to. And for the past several months, I haven’t been able to resist the urge to try to articulate taste. This comes, in part, from a place of wanting to be precise — now that the term is such a frequent and varied part of our lexicon, it runs the risk of losing its meaning. But I also believe taste is something we can and should try to cultivate. Not because taste itself is a virtue, per se, but because I’ve found a taste-filled life to be a richer one. To pursue it is to appreciate ourselves, each other, and the stuff we’re surrounded by a whole lot more.

So, how to wrap my arms around this term in a way that captures its spirit without flattening it? I can’t think of a piece of writing that does this more effectively than Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp.’” In her words, “a sensibility is one of the hardest things to talk about... To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility.”

So, in shameless imitation of a master and tastemaker, here are my notes on “taste.”

1. To start very generally, taste is a mode. It's a manner of interpretation, expression, or action. Things don't feel tasteful, they demonstrate taste. Someone's home can be decorated tastefully. Someone can dress tastefully. The vibe cannot be tasteful. The experience cannot be tasteful.
2. Appreciation is a form of taste. Creation is another. They are often intertwined, but don't have to be. Someone could have impeccable taste in art, without producing any themselves. Those who create tasteful things are almost always deep appreciators, though. Mark Ronson listens to and loves **a lot** of music. Samin Nosrat tries and savors **a lot** of food.
3. There are degrees of taste, but we typically talk about it in binaries. One can have taste or not. Great taste means almost the same thing as taste.
4. You probably already have an intuitive sense of the people in your life who have great taste in something. They're the people you always go to for restaurant or movie or gear recommendations. Maybe it's the person you ask to be an extra set of eyes on an email or a project brief before you send it out.
5. It's probably a permanent state — taste isn't often outgrown.
6. Though taste may appear effortless, you can't have taste by mistake. It requires intention, focus, and care. Taste is a commitment to a state of attention. It's a process of peeling back layer after layer, turning over rock after rock. As John Saltivier says in **an essay** about building a set of stairs, "surprising detail is a near universal property of getting up close and personal with reality."
7. Most people with taste can tell you, in explicit terms, how they came to it. That story typically involves someone else ushering them into it, directly or indirectly.
8. Taste comes in lanes. To quote Susan Sontag again, "There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion — and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas. One

of the facts to be reckoned with is that taste tends to develop very unevenly. It's rare that the same person has good visual taste and good taste in people and taste in ideas." The sought-after interior designer may not mind gas station coffee. The prolific composer may not give a damn about how they dress.

9. Taste in too many things would be tortuous. The things we have taste in often start as a pea under the mattress. To have taste is to be persnickety and one doesn't want to be persnickety or annoyed about too many things. There are people who are like this. They are grumps. Taste takes effort. Plain old curiosity would do, too.
10. While taste is often focused on a single thing, it is often formed through the integration of diverse, and wide-ranging inputs. Steve Jobs has said, "I think part of what made the Macintosh great was that the people working on it were musicians and poets and artists and zoologists and historians who also happened to be the best computer scientists in the world."
11. Irony and satire are frenemies of taste. Like irony and satire, taste is on its toes. It's alert. Taste, irony, and satire all embrace the incisive spirit of sharp critique. But unlike irony and satire, taste is earnest. It doesn't like to fake it and it can't be too far removed from reality.
12. The best definition of taste I found comes from painter John Folley. He says "'Good taste' is simply to have a well formed opinion, in accordance with the realities of the Good and the True." There are tasteful and non-tasteful choices. Taste reveals its purveyor to be a good decision-maker.
13. Taste is not the same as correctness, though. To do something correctly is not necessarily to do it tastefully. For most things, correctness is good enough, so we skate by on that as the default. And there are many correct paths to take. You'll be able to cook a yummy meal, enjoy the movie, build a useable product, don a shirt that fits. But taste gets you to the thing that's more than just correct. Taste hits different. It intrigues. It compels. It moves. It enchants. It fascinates. It seduces.

14. Taste requires originality. It invokes an aspirational authenticity. Writer George Saunders calls this “achieving the iconic space,” and it’s what he’s after when he meets his creative writing students. “They arrive already wonderful. What we try to do over the next three years is help them achieve what I call their “iconic space” — the place from which they will write the stories only they could write, using what makes them uniquely themselves...At this level, good writing is assumed; the goal is to help them acquire the technical means to become defiantly and joyfully themselves.”
15. Taste honors someone’s standards of quality, but also the distinctive way the world bounces off a person. It reflects what they know about how the world works, and also what they’re working with in their inner worlds. When we recognize true taste, we are recognizing that alchemic combination of skill and soul. This is why it is so alluring.
16. Still, taste is closely intertwined with snobbery. And indeed, many snobs (coffee snobs, gear snobs, wine snobs, etc.) often have great taste. But I would say that taste is the sensibility, and snobbery is one way to express the sensibility. It’s not the only way.
17. There’s also a difference between expensive and tasteful. If rich people often have good taste it’s because they grew up around nice things, and many of them acquired an intolerance for not nice things as a result. That’s a good recipe for taste, but it’s not sufficient and it’s definitely not a guarantee. I know people that are exceedingly picky about the food they eat and never pay more than \$20 for a meal.
18. My artist friends have excellent taste, and they are certainly not the richest group of people I know. One hypothesis is that creating forces taste upon its maker. Creators must master self-expression *and* craft if they’re going to make something truly compelling.
19. Another hypothesis is that artists are more sensitive. They’re more observant, feel things more deeply, more obsessive about details, more focused on how they measure up to greatness. It’s self-conscious. It’s

intimate. It's idiosyncratic. And when they get it right, it's as tasteful as it gets.

20. Another framing for this is "turpentine." It comes from Picasso remarking that "when art critics get together they talk about Form and Structure and Meaning. When artists get together they talk about where you can buy cheap turpentine." Taste rests on turpentine.
21. The process of cultivating taste is a lot like the writing and editing process. Here's George Saunders on the revision process. "The way I revise is: I read my own text and imagine a little meter in my head, with "P" on one side ("Positive") and "N" on the other ("Negative")... This involves making thousands of what I've come to think of as "micro-decisions." These are instantaneous, intuitive – I just prefer this to that... I just have a feeling and react to that feeling, in the form of a cut phrase, or an added word, or an urge to move this whole section, and so on. And then I do that over and over, for months, sometimes years, until that needle stays up in the "P" zone for the whole length of the text...With each choice, even the smallest ones, the story becomes more and more...well, it becomes more her, you could say. There's more of her essential nature in it, more of what will distinguish her from all of those other writers out there. And gradually, the story starts to become something she couldn't have foreseen when she started out – bigger, more complex, smarter, funnier, whatever."
22. So, there's the trick. The path to taste is really as simple as writing a little plus and minus in the margin more often. If we apply this to digital space, we can turn them from an overwhelming and chaotic bombardment into a steady stream of things we find beautiful, that in turn, can define our tastes. For me, Are.na is a space for this kind of curation. I contribute to it all the time and it remains my-kind-of quiet and pretty there. As a friend recently described it, Are.na is an "internet mind palace of cool stuff."
23. Be patient, the process of metabolizing the world is a slow one. Wield your P/N meter well, take your time learning what you find compelling,

and why. There are no shortcuts to taste. Taste cannot sublimate. It can only bloom. To quote Susan Sontag one last time, “taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste.”

There’s also a channel version of this essay, below, that is open — please feel free to add your own notes on taste to it:

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who am I?
by Charlene A

Thanks to: Taylor, Tammy, Molly, Nan, Sarah, Anna, Lindsay, Charleton, Jenny, Tyler, and Nadia for indulging me in endless iterations of this conversation.

*Brie spends her days **researching and writing** about the ways great organizations coordinate and build culture. She loves the mountains. You can learn more about her and her past lives and work [here](#).*



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