

# The Taste(s) of a Recipe

Davide Bordini  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Liege  
[davide.bordini@gmail.com](mailto:davide.bordini@gmail.com)

To appear in A. Borghini and P. Engisch (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Recipes: Making, Experiencing, and Valuing*. London: Bloomsbury.

[Penultimate draft, November 2020. Please do not quote without permission]

**Abstract.** In this paper, I investigate the relation between recipes and taste. In particular, I do three things. First, I sketch and articulate different versions of essentialism, a view that I take to reflect our pre-theoretical intuitions on the matter. Roughly, on this view, taste is essentially related to recipes—either by contributing to their identity or by being otherwise strongly related to it. Second, I argue that no version of essentialism is really convincing; hence, I conclude, recipes and taste are not essentially related. Third, after drawing some general lessons from the discussion, I lay the ground for an alternative approach to account for that relation. My final suggestion will be that the main source of the relation between recipes and taste is not to be found in recipes themselves and their essences, but in dishes—i.e., the concrete instances of a recipe.

**Keywords:** Taste; identity of recipes; dishes; essentialism; philosophy of food.

\*\*\*

## 1 Introduction

Taste plays a marginal role, or no role at all, in discussions about recipes and their identity. This is surprising, given the importance of taste in our everyday food practices and in motivating our food choices (see, e.g., Liem and Russell 2019). In this paper, I want to bring taste to the foreground. The broad question I have in mind concerns the relation between recipes and taste. This is a huge question, so the focus will have to be narrowed down to something more specific and tractable.

A useful starting point is the following story about recipes and taste:

When we cook, we aim for (re)producing certain gustatory experiences we give value to and making them available at different places and times. Recipes are what allows us to do

that. They are *guides* to taste: to get the desired gustatory experience, we just have to (re)produce a proper instance of the right recipe—or *find* the right recipe. For example, you like the taste of saffron *risotto* and really want to enjoy it again at home for dinner tonight. What do you do? Well, you cook it: you (re)produce a proper instance of saffron *risotto* and thereby you get to enjoy once again that taste you were desperately craving for. Now, in virtue of what do recipes guide us to taste? Easy: taste is a distinctive trait of a recipe—i.e., something that contributes to its identity or is otherwise strongly related to it. In other words, a recipe is *essentially* related to a certain taste, and this explains the association between the two. Take again our example: saffron *risotto* is essentially related to a certain taste. So, there cannot be something that counts as an instance of saffron *risotto* that does not deliver that gustatory experience. And this is why I just need to reproduce an instance of saffron *risotto*, to get that experience.

At first sight, all this sounds quite natural and intuitive. But is it also true? In particular, is it true that a recipe possesses its taste essentially? In this paper, I address this question and offer a negative reply to it. Do not get me wrong: I do not mean to deny that recipes and taste are somehow associated—I just do not think that they are in the way suggested right above. My aim, then, is to lay the ground for an alternative approach to account for that association. In short, my final suggestion will be that the main source of the association between recipes and taste is not to be found in recipes themselves and their essences, but in dishes.

Here is how I will proceed. I will start with some clarifications about dishes, recipes, and taste. This will provide the preliminary grounds to better formulate and understand the question that I am raising here (Sect. 2). Next, I will offer a more precise characterization of the specific view that I want to target. I will sketch and discuss different versions of it and argue that they are not convincing (Sect. 3). I will then point out some general lessons concerning recipes that can be drawn from our discussion and will set the grounds for an alternative picture (Sect. 4).

My discussion will be largely conducted by reasoning from first principles. This is because, to the best of my knowledge, the idea I criticize here has not been explicitly formulated in a fully articulated philosophical view. As weird as this might sound, it is not an unusual situation in philosophy of food, especially when it comes to theories of recipes—a largely neglected and unexplored area, where a huge amount of work is still ahead of us in terms of mapping the logical space. (Borghini's (2011, 2012, 2014a, b, c, 2015) research on the topic is a notable exception.) With this paper, then, I want to give a double contribution: in addition to providing philosophical reasons to dismiss the idea that a recipe is essentially related to its taste,

I offer a philosophical articulation of that very idea, thereby furthering the mapping of the logical space.

## 2 Recipes, dishes, and taste

*Recipes and dishes.* I borrow this distinction from Borghini (2015). Consider, e.g., a slice of *pizza*. Intuitively, there are two ways to look at it. A slice of *pizza* can be understood as *that* concrete object that is *now* in my kitchen and I am ready to eat. Or it can be understood as the array of the *repeatable aspects* whose repetition would deliver a slice of *pizza* of the same sort. When understood in the first sense, our slice of *pizza* is a dish; when understood in the second sense, it is a recipe.<sup>1</sup>

Following Borghini, my understanding of what counts as a dish is very broad and permissive: ‘anything that is ready for someone to be eaten up’ (2015: 722) or drunk counts as a dish. So, dishes are not just the sort of things that are cooked in restaurant or at home; cheeses, fruits, chocolate, cookies, drinks, etc.—they all count as dishes.

*Taste.* First of all, by ‘taste’ I do *not* mean to refer to anything having to do with our aesthetic judgment concerning food—i.e., the sort of statements we make about something tasting good or bad. Rather, what I have in mind are *taste properties*: a certain class of qualitative properties that we typically attribute to foods and drinks and we experience by using our sense of taste, i.e., by eating or drinking.

Secondly, strictly speaking, only five basic gustatory properties count as taste properties: sweetness, sourness, bitterness, saltiness and umaminess. However, my use of ‘taste property’ here will be broader, in order to include also what are typically referred to as flavors, i.e., properties such as aroma, fruitiness, herbalness, meatiness, smokiness, etc.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This casts dishes as *tokens* and recipes as abstract entities of some sort (*types* or *kinds*). Thus, it departs from a view that some might find *prima facie* more intuitive—i.e., the view that dishes are types of material objects that result from the application of certain types of procedures (see, e.g., Hirvonen this volume). I cannot fully defend my choice here. However, reasons of ontological parsimony seem to preliminarily militate in its favor—after all, if we can commit to only two categories of entities (dishes and recipes) as opposed to three (recipe-types, dish-types, dish-tokens), this is preferable. Moreover, treating dishes as types introduces further complications, as it forces us to account for the relation between recipe-types and dish-types, too.

<sup>2</sup> It is a matter of dispute what is the best account of taste properties (see, e.g., Korsmeyer 1999; Smith 2009, 2013, 2015; Richardson 2013; Meskin and Robson 2015; Lycan 2018; Todd 2018). Questions arise here that at least partially overlap with those raised by phenomenal properties of other sorts, such as colors, sounds or odors. Though

Thirdly, I have talked about the taste of a recipe, and this might sound weird. After all, one might think, recipes are abstract entities and, as such, they are not the kind of things that *have* taste, strictly speaking. These doubts are legitimate, so let me say something more to better qualify this. When I say that a recipe has a taste, I do not mean to say that it tastes salty or fruity or else—this is the way in which a *dish* has a taste; recipes do not have taste in *this* sense. Rather, what I mean is that recipes are somehow associated with some set of properties that determine a certain type of *gustatory profile*. Such a type of gustatory profile is what I mean here by ‘taste of a recipe.’ From now on, I will use expressions like ‘taste of a recipe,’ ‘type of gustatory profile associated with a recipe,’ ‘taste properties associated with a recipe’ interchangeably, unless otherwise specified. Is there a unique type of gustatory profile for every recipe or can there be more? This is an important question and is part of what I am going to discuss here. So, I leave it open for now.

With this at hand, we are now in the position to have a better grasp on the very general background question that motivates this paper: How should we understand the relation between a recipe and some type of gustatory profile that is (usually or typically) associated with it?

The hypothesis anticipated in the introduction is that we have to look at recipes themselves to find the source of this association. Intuitively, the thought is that a recipe possesses a certain type of taste *in its own right*, just by being the recipe it is—i.e., independently of its being related to any other thing, dishes in particular. This is because—the thought goes—a certain type of gustatory profile constitutes the very essence of a recipe or is otherwise strongly related to it. In short, a recipe has its taste *essentially*. Call this *essentialism*.

This brings us to the more specific question I want to directly tackle in this paper: Is (some version of) essentialism true? In other words, is it true that recipes possess their taste essentially? As anticipated, I will reply negatively to this question.

### 3 Essentialism

In this section, I discuss essentialism. First, I will construe the view in its general form. I will do that somewhat dogmatically and schematically, as my aim here is just to introduce the view and

---

quite important, these issues are orthogonal to the present discussion. So, I will remain neutral on them, as much as possible (see also footnote 7).

not argue for it. Then, I will articulate the different specific subversions of essentialism and consider them in turn. As I will argue, none of them offers a convincing account of the relation between recipes and taste.

### 3.1 General essentialism

The core ideas behind essentialism are two: (i) recipes have an *essence* that fixes their identity; (ii) they have a taste *autonomously*, just by having that essence—*nothing else* is required; dishes, in particular, are not required. With this in mind, essentialism in its general form can be captured as follows.

1. Recipes are *kinds* of gustatory objects (dishes).<sup>3</sup>
2. Recipes have an *essence* that fixes their identity, once and for all: A recipe R and a recipe R\* are one and the same recipe if and only if R and R\* are the same with respect to a certain set of essential properties.
3. Recipes are *autonomous*: they do not need anything else—in particular, they do not need dishes—to have the properties they have, be what they are, and exist.
4. This conception thus attributes metaphysical *priority* to recipes (the abstract kinds) over dishes (the concrete instances). So, *recipes come first*: they are prior to, and exist independently of, dishes—facts about recipes are not determined or explained by facts about dishes but determine or explain facts about dishes.
5. Given their priority, recipes dictate what properties their instances (dishes) cannot fail to have. So, the essence of a recipe R, in addition to fixing R's identity, will also dictate what properties a dish must have to be an instance of R. This provides us with a criterion to identify the dishes instances of R: *All and only* the dishes that are instances of R have R's essential properties—or some corresponding properties, which can be linguistically expressed by the same predicate. If P and Q are the properties that constitute the essence of, say, the *carbonara*-recipe, then all and only *carbonara*-dishes will have P and Q—or

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a simplification. On this view, recipes are likely to be construed as *norm*-kinds, which have been largely discussed in philosophy of music (e.g., Wolterstorff 1980; Anderson 1985; Dodd 2007). However, given the purposes of this paper, we can safely ignore these complications. The substance of the points that I am going to raise will not change. I leave it up to the reader aware of the relevant complications to operate the relevant substitutions and adapt the discussion appropriately.

some corresponding properties, which can be linguistically expressed by ‘P’ and ‘Q.’ Moreover, *carbonara*-dishes have P and Q only *derivatively*, *qua* instances of *carbonara*-recipe.

6. It follows that a recipe has its taste just by being the recipe it is, i.e., just by possessing a certain set of essential properties. By contrast, dishes have their taste only *qua* instances of a recipe. Recipes, thus, are the *primary* bearers of taste, while dishes have a taste only *derivatively*.

The claim in (6) that a recipe possesses its taste just by possessing a certain set of essential properties can be spelled out in different ways. On one understanding, it means that taste properties are (among the) essential properties of a recipe, thus (partially) contributing to its identity. On a different understanding, it means that the essential properties of a recipe, though they are not taste properties themselves, determine the taste a recipe possesses. This delivers different essentialist options. Let us examine them in turn.

### 3.2 Strong essentialism

According to the strongest version of essentialism, taste properties constitute the essence of a recipe—they *entirely* determine its identity. On this view, then, the identity criterion for recipes is sameness with respect to taste—same taste, same recipe; different taste, different recipe. More precisely, R and R\* are the same recipe if and only if they are the same taste-wise.<sup>4</sup> So, what makes, e.g., *carbonara* the recipe it is, is its *carbonara* taste. As a consequence (see (5) in subsection 3.1), *all and only* the *carbonara* dishes will have the same unique *carbonara* taste.<sup>5</sup> More generally, all and only the dishes that are instances of the same recipe R have the same taste. This means that there cannot be a dish that has, say, a *carbonara* taste but is not an instance of *carbonara*. This is highly implausible. To see why, consider the following case.

---

<sup>4</sup> The reader familiar with the debate in philosophy of music might find this view similar to sonicism (Dodd 2007, 2010). This impression is not off target: to some extent, strong essentialism is modeled on sonicism. However, I do not mean to suggest here (a) that strong essentialism is the philosophy of food counterpart of sonicism or (b) that my criticisms can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, across different domains to hit sonicism.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, variations in taste among different instances of the same recipe are allowed as long as they are variations among *tokens* of the same *type*—the taste of a recipe is a *type* of gustatory profile (see Sect. 2).

*The matzo pill.* Matzo is the unleavened flatbread consumed by Jewish people during Passover. Suppose that, for some reasons, one day some genius scientist comes up with a chewable pill that perfectly replicates all the taste properties of a matzo that you would eat during a Passover *seder*. So, the matzo pill tastes just like a piece of matzo bread—they are indistinguishable, and indeed the same, taste-wise.

If strong essentialism is true, then we should conclude that (i) the matzo pill is an instance of matzo, and (ii) the recipe of the matzo pill and that of matzo are just one and the same recipe. Intuitively, however, this just seems false—and we should probably reject a theory that forces such counter-intuitive conclusions upon us. For plausibly, the matzo pill is *not* an instance of matzo, as well as the recipe of the matzo pill and that of matzo are *not* one and the same recipe.

### **3.3 Two more plausible versions of essentialism**

#### **3.3.1 Moderate essentialism**

At this stage, the essentialist can weaken their view and maintain that taste properties alone do not exhaust the essence of a recipe—they are *among* the essential properties of a recipe, but *not* the only ones. This move generates *moderate essentialism*, according to which taste is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the identity of a recipe. As a consequence, on this view, it is still true that *all* the instances of a recipe R have the same taste T; but it is no longer true that *only* the instances of R have T.

Of course, to be complete, this version of essentialism has to tell us what other properties, along with taste, constitute the essence of a recipe—perhaps, the most natural option would be to combine taste with ingredients and/or production procedures. However, at this stage, the main worry does not concern the specific set of necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient for the identity of a recipe, but the very plausibility of treating taste as a necessary condition for the identity of a recipe. In a nutshell, it seems that the same recipe might allow for a great deal of variations in taste—dishes that we would intuitively take as instances of the same recipe often taste very differently. This does not just mean that some of them taste good, while some others taste bad; it means that their gustatory profiles differ significantly, to the extent that they seem to be of different types. Consider, for example, *pizza margherita*—it allows for a good number of variations in taste. To be sure, a pie of Neapolitan *pizza margherita* and a pie of, say, Pizza Hut or Domino's *pizza margherita* taste quite differently. Both might taste good, but they do seem to

have two different types of taste. This variety of taste-types associated with the same recipe militates against imposing taste as a necessary condition for the identity of a recipe.

The moderate essentialist might try and overcome this difficulty by individuating a minimal set of taste properties that remain constant across variations and, on these grounds, define a necessary condition for the identity of a recipe. The problem with this proposal is that this set is quite hard to pin down. In particular, the range of variations is so wide that reasonable doubts arise as to whether we are going to end up with the necessary condition we need—i.e., something less trivial and more informative than just having a *pizza margherita* taste. Moreover, it is quite hard to see what a *pizza margherita* taste—understood as the minimal set of taste properties that are supposed to be common to all *pizza margherita*-dishes—would be exactly. Actually, it is legitimate to doubt that there really is any such thing—at least in some interesting sense. After all, a Neapolitan *margherita* pie and a Pizza Hut or Domino’s *margherita* pie do not really seem to have a lot in common taste-wise. Granted, both are probably salty, oily, cheesy, etc. But many dishes share these very basic taste properties, without sharing a *pizza margherita* taste. So, in this case, the necessary condition we are imposing does not just reek of triviality, it is also quite obscure.

A better option is to contend that *pizza margherita* is not a single recipe but a *family of recipes*: Domino’s *margherita* and Neapolitan *margherita* are not the same recipe—they are in fact *two* different recipes that belong to the same family. Each member in the family is a recipe on its own and is qualitatively different from the others, though somehow parented to them. The natural move is to capture this in terms of determinate-determinable relation—Domino’s or Pizza Hut *margherita* and Neapolitan *margherita* would then be different *determinates* of the same *determinable*. The next move is to maintain that this reflects and is ultimately explained by the relation between the different tastes in question. The thought is, the taste of Domino’s or Pizza Hut *margherita* is qualitatively different from that of a Neapolitan *margherita*: they are different determinates of the same determinable, *pizza margherita* taste.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the latter might be construed as something that does not need an exhaustive list of descriptive features to be identified—possession of the right *recognitional concept* might suffice (Evans 1982; Peacocke 1992; Loar 1997). This would guarantee that instances of the determinable *pizza margherita* taste can be spotted without having to indicate the distinctive features of such a taste.

---

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Patrik Engisch for pointing this out to me.



The viability of this way of construing moderate essentialism relies on (a) the plausibility of treating *pizza margherita* as a family of recipes, (b) modelling the relations within the domain of taste in terms of determinate-determinable relations, and (c) the possibility of extending this treatment to cases other than *pizza margherita*. I will not discuss this here. To my mind, the main reason to drop moderate essentialism comes from a different and more general problem that affects *all* versions of the view. I will raise it in subsection 3.4. Before that, let me introduce the last and weakest version of essentialism.

### 3.3.2 Weak essentialism

An alternative option is available to the essentialist. They can maintain that even though taste itself does not fix the identity of a recipe, it strictly depends upon the essential properties that fix its identity—these properties being ingredients and production procedures. In short, the idea is: same ingredients and procedures, same recipe, same taste; different ingredients or procedures, different recipe, different taste. This is *weak essentialism*.

Weak essentialism combines the following two claims:

- (Identity)            The identity of a recipe is fixed by a certain combination of ingredients and production procedures.
- (Determination)    The combination of ingredients and procedures that fixes the identity of a recipe R also determines the taste of R.

(Identity) provides us with the identity criterion for a recipe R—i.e., a certain combination of ingredients and procedures. (Determination) adds that such a combination of ingredients and procedures is what makes a certain gustatory profile the taste *of* R, as opposed to the taste of another recipe. For example, *carbonara* is individuated by a certain combination of ingredients (e.g., *guanciale*, eggs, pasta, etc.) and a set of procedures that specify how to deal with those ingredients, put them together, and cook them properly. This combination, which fixes the identity of *carbonara*, also makes it the case that *carbonara* is associated with some type of gustatory profile and not others. Such a gustatory profile is the taste *of carbonara* (as opposed to be that of, say, saffron *risotto*) because it is determined by the combination of ingredients and procedures that fixes the identity of *carbonara* (and not that of saffron *risotto*).

There are different ways to object to this view. Here is one example. Via the determination claim, weak essentialism establishes a strong relation between ingredients and procedures and taste. This, in turn, assumes that taste properties are at least partially dependent upon the physico-chemical properties of the ingredients. So, one way of attacking the view consists in challenging this assumption. To that end, some inverted *qualia* scenario can be devised (Shoemaker 1982; Block 1990; Byrne 2020) such that the same treatment of the same physico-chemical properties delivers systematically inverted taste experiences in pairs of subjects whose taste *qualia* are inverted. Of course, the success of this strategy is tied to the possibility of adapting inverted *qualia* cases, originally engineered for visual properties like color, to taste properties.

However, this is not the path I intend to pursue here. So, I will not call into question the (partial) dependence of taste properties on the physico-chemical properties of the ingredients; rather, I will assume it. Instead, I want to raise a different problem—one that I find more interesting, given the purposes of this paper.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will initially present it as an objection to weak essentialism. However, it targets moderate essentialism, too, as anticipated—I will quickly show how, toward the end of the next subsection. Therefore, it provides us with reasons to drop essentialism as such. In addition, it will pave the way for some more general lessons about recipes.

### 3.4 Against essentialism

Let us consider the following scenario.

*The Authentic Margherita.* Nobody knows, but Ciro and Maria are the guardians of the ‘authentic’ recipe of *pizza margherita*, the Authentic Margherita. Contrary to what people believe, the recipe was named after an ancestor of Maria’s, Margherita, who invented it in 1800. Maria and Ciro are faithful to the letter of the recipe. They follow exactly the same procedures and use the same tools and the same oven used by Margherita back in 1800. Moreover, the recipe tells exactly what ingredients have to be used and where they have to come from. Indeed, over the last two centuries, all the ingredients have been supplied by the same small farm, located right outside Naples. However, the region around Naples has gone through some important climatic and geo-physical changes over the last couple

---

<sup>7</sup> In the present context, this is an innocuous assumption concerning taste properties, insofar as it grants a point to the essentialist.

of hundred years. These changes have affected the water, the San Marzano tomatoes, the yeast, the sourdough, etc., thereby leading to some dramatic change in taste. Of course, nobody has noticed this. Yet, if one could compare the taste of the *pizza* made by Margherita in 1800 and the one made now by Maria and Ciro, one would immediately spot the difference in taste.

This case raises the following challenge for weak essentialism. Intuitively, the Authentic Margherita-recipe has not changed over time—its taste has changed. This conflicts with the determination claim assumed by weak essentialism, which excludes that the same combination of ingredients and procedures can deliver a different taste. Recall, the determination claim is a crucial part of the view, as it explains what makes a certain gustatory profile the taste *of* a recipe. Dropping it would just be tantamount to dropping the view—or at the very least, it would leave the view incapable of explaining what makes the new taste the taste *of* the same Authentic Margherita-recipe.

The weak essentialist will probably push back as follows. Given (Identity), whether or not the recipe remains the same over time depends on whether or not the ingredients that partially constitute its essence remain the same. The intuition that conflicts with weak essentialism assumes that ingredients do not change over time. However, this assumption can be challenged by arguing that, in fact, ingredients do change over time. The weak essentialist might suggest that the changes occurred between 1800 and 2020 in, say, San Marzano tomatoes are such that 1800 San Marzano and 2020 San Marzano are not the same ingredients. If so, then the view is safe and there is no need to drop the determination claim: a difference in ingredients, though combined with the same procedures, suffices to provide an explanation of the changes in taste that is compatible with weak essentialism. The price to be paid, of course, is to bite the bullet and maintain that 1800 Margherita and 2020 Margherita are two different recipes.

As I am going to argue, this is a Pyrrhic victory for weak essentialism. For either (i) it generates a problem that is even bigger than the one it is supposed to solve, or (ii) it does not really solve the initial problem with the determination claim. Therefore, it is not really a way out.

Let us start with the first horn of our dilemma, (i). As we have seen, claiming that in the Authentic Margherita case ingredients change over time presupposes a more fine-grained way of individuating ingredients, according to which micro-level differences count for the identity of the ingredients. The problem with this is the following. For any level of fine-ness of grain of

ingredient individuation, we can generate a new version of the Authentic Margherita case that forces the weak essentialist to introduce a new, even more fine-grained distinction in ingredients, and so in recipes, to save the determination claim. For example, we can generate a case that forces the weak essentialist to distinguish between 1950 San Marzano and 2020 San Marzano and then say that 1950 Margherita is not the same recipe as 2020 Margherita. But now, again, another version can be generated that forces the weak essentialist to introduce a further distinction between 1950 San Marzano and 1975 San Marzano, and hence between 1950 Margherita and 1975 Margherita, and so forth and so on. In principle, this can go on until one reaches the point of having one recipe for each existing dish, which would clearly be a bad result. First, it would lead to an over-proliferation of recipes, thereby inflating our ontology for no other reason than just defending weak essentialism. Second, and more importantly, it would undermine the *repeatability* of recipes, thereby making them ultimately collapse into dishes. Losing track of the difference between recipes and dishes is a major problem for a theory of recipes—a definitely bigger one than not explaining the relation between recipes and taste.

This takes us to the second horn of the dilemma, (ii). The only way to block the over-proliferation of recipes and preserve their repeatability is to impose a cutoff, a threshold beyond which micro-level differences are no longer relevant to individuate ingredients. This implies to stop at a certain level of fine-ness of grain. But the weak essentialist cannot really follow this path and save their view. For as we have seen, whatever the level of fine-ness of grain, an appropriate version of the Authentic Margherita case can be generated that challenges the determination claim and makes the initial problem reappear.

The Authentic Margherita case challenges moderate essentialism, too. Recall, the latter construes the identity of a recipe not just as determining the taste of a recipe but, more strongly, as partially constituted by it. *A fortiori*, thus, it cannot allow for a scenario in which the recipe stays the same, while its taste changes. So, the moderate essentialist is forced to say that the recipe changes along with taste. However, they need to independently motivate such a counter-intuitive claim—of course, complaining that otherwise moderate essentialism would turn out false does not suffice. It is not clear what the moderate essentialist might say. One natural option would be to make the same move the weak essentialist makes—or even adopt weak essentialism as fallback position—and argue that the recipe changes because ingredients change. But, as we have seen, this is not really a way out.

Notice that appealing to a determinate-determinable relation would not help either. For it would mean to treat Authentic Margherita as a family of recipes, but this is false by assumption and is anyway quite implausible—at best, Authentic Margherita might be considered as one of the recipes within the *pizza margherita* family. In addition, it would lead to introduce a new recipe within the family for any change in taste (or ingredients) across time. As we have seen, any such change can be generated at any point in time and for any level of fine-ness of grain. So, we would still get something very close to the problem raised right above, along with its bad consequences for ontological parsimony and the repeatability of recipes.

What about denying the claim that changes in ingredients deliver changes in taste? This might block the Authentic Margherita case. But, first, the mutual independence of taste and ingredients should be independently motivated. Second, what would be the cost of such a move? It would generate a version of moderate essentialism on which the same combination of ingredients can be paired with different taste experiences in different subjects. In principle, such a view leaves open the possibility that there might be as many recipes as there are subjects. In addition to introducing a too solipsistic criterion for the identity of recipes, this would definitely not solve the ontological parsimony or repeatability issues. (Perhaps, the specific problem would not be *intrasubjective* repeatability, but *intersubjective* repeatability.)

Therefore, I conclude, no version of essentialism is satisfying. They all establish a strong relationship between the taste and the identity of a recipe. In so doing, they fail to offer a convincing account.

## **4 Lessons and a new starting point**

In this section, I highlight some general lessons I draw from the discussion on essentialism. Then, on these grounds, I offer a rough sketch of an alternative hypothesis to account for the relation between recipes and taste, thereby setting the agenda for further research.

### **4.1 Lessons**

The first lesson is that essentialism should be dropped: the relation between recipes and taste does not fix the identity of a recipe nor does it depend on it. As we have seen, two dishes might taste the same, but that does not make them instances of the same recipe. Conversely, they might

taste differently and be instances of the same recipe. So, the taste and the identity of a recipe come apart. Clearly, this does not mean to deny that they are somehow associated—of course, they are. The point is to relax such an association and find a different way to look at it, given that our discussion suggests that it is not rooted in the essence of recipes. Plausibly, then, a recipe does not get to be associated with some gustatory profile just by being what it is, but in virtue of something else.

The second lesson is that recipes cannot be too detailed, on pain of losing their *repeatability*. They are *elliptic*, as Borghini (2015) correctly points out: they leave out details concerning many aspects of the dishes that count as their instances. As we have seen, too many details about ingredients might make a recipe unrepeatable, insofar as they might be too fine-grained to be replicable across space and time. (Moreover, it is not obvious that *all* those details can even be registered.) So, recipes often gloss over many factors that are instead relevant to taste. A consequence of this is that, contrary to what essentialism assumes, a recipe typically underdetermines its taste—i.e., it does not carry enough information to individuate a unique associated gustatory profile.

Connected to this is a third lesson. Their being elliptic is what makes at least some recipes constitutively open to both synchronic and diachronic modification and change, thereby making it possible for the same recipe to vary, evolve, and be innovated. Essentialism cannot accept this—let alone explain it. For it is forced to introduce a new recipe for any significant variation in taste. What we need then is not a theory that denies that the same recipe can have different tastes, but one that embraces this as a fact and provides us with tools to explain it. This is crucial to have a good account of recipes and their relationship with taste.

This invites the following general diagnosis. Insofar as it assumes the priority and the autonomy of recipes, essentialism fails to acknowledge the key point: the elliptic nature of recipes. An alternative account of the relation between recipes and taste should instead start from there.

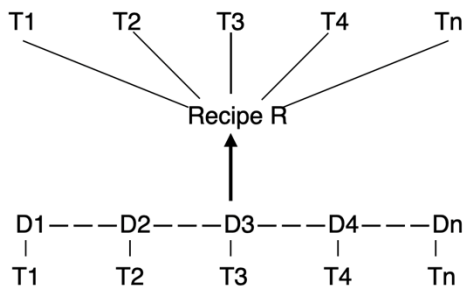
## **4.2 A new starting point: dishes come first!**

My sketch of a positive view, thus, begins with assuming that recipes are elliptic entities, not only with respect to ingredients and procedures, but also with respect to taste—and very much so. That is, the identity of a recipe *per se* does not include or determine in any way the details

about the taste of that recipe. Rather, it is up to the dishes that count as instances of that recipe filling in the details about taste.

Essentialism is a *recipes-come-first* view. According to it, recipes are prior to dishes. Recipes are the primary bearers of taste and dictate the taste of dishes that count as their instances. This strategy did not prove very satisfying. My proposal, then, is to overturn it by adopting a *dishes-come-first* perspective as a starting point. The general idea is, taste is not something that a recipe possesses autonomously, but by being appropriately related to dishes—i.e., by being the recipe of which those dishes are instances. On this perspective, then, dishes are the primary bearers of taste and determine the taste—or the tastes—of a recipe, by being its instances.

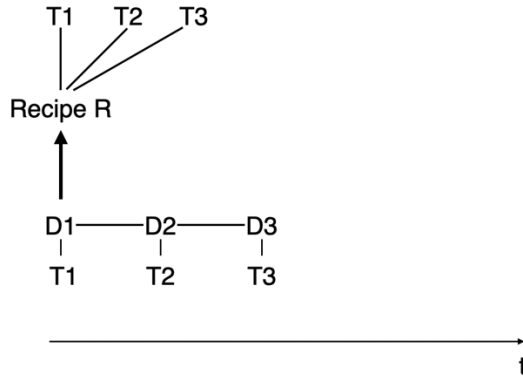
Unlike essentialism, this strategy does not block in principle the association of the same recipe with more than just one type of gustatory profile, insofar as it does not link the taste of a recipe to its identity. On the contrary, recipes are now identified independently of their taste and acquire taste from their instances, which possess it autonomously. This makes variety, innovation, change, and evolution possible. The diagram in Figure 1 sketches the general idea:



(Figure 1)

We have a set of dishes (D1, D2, ... Dn), each of them having a taste (T1, T2, ... Tn) and being related to the other dishes by some important relation, which constitutes the criterion to determine that D1, D2, ... Dn are instances of the recipe R. By having D1, D2, ... Dn as its instances, R ‘acquires’ all their tastes (T1 ... Tn) as its tastes. Importantly, T1, T2, ... Tn might be tokens of the same type of gustatory profile, but they do not have to be. If they are not, R acquires different tastes.

Figure 1 illustrates the *synchronic* acquisition of taste by a recipe. However, the acquisition of taste(s) by a recipe can be *diachronic*, too, as shown in Figure 2:



(Figure 2)

As time ( $t$ ) passes, more and more dishes, and hence their taste (or tastes), become associated with the same recipe  $R$ . Again,  $T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n$  do not have to be tokens of the same type. If they are not,  $R$  acquires different tastes.

Synchronic and diachronic taste acquisition are the basis of the innovation, evolution, change and variation in the taste of one and the same recipe. They provide us with the beginning of a possible explanation of these phenomena.

### 4.3 Open questions

Far from being conclusive, these remarks are just a first step. So, before concluding, let me quickly illustrate the open questions that must be addressed to consolidate these rough ideas into a fully articulated philosophical view. This sets the agenda for future research. It will also provide the reader with a better idea of the available options and, hence, of the different directions in which a recipes-come-first account can be developed.

First, we need an independent, non-essentialist *criterion* to determine when a dish counts as an instance of a recipe—i.e., a criterion (a) other than taste (b) that grounds the identity of a recipe in facts or decisions about dishes. At least two options are available. One might think that there are some mind-independent facts about dishes that carve the culinary space at its joints, as it were, thereby allowing the individuation of different recipes. The idea is that dishes that share



some relevant properties (e.g., ingredients and procedures) or have a common origin are instances of the same recipe. This is a *realist* criterion to individuate recipes and their instances moving from facts about dishes.<sup>8</sup>

Alternatively, one might think that facts about dishes and recipes are not mind-independent but depend, at least partially, on some human *fiat*. The point is not denying that dishes, *qua* material objects, have certain properties. Rather, the thought is that those properties alone do not offer a good enough criterion to determine the recipe a dish is an instance of. That requires something more, namely, human decisions or acts—e.g., a declaration of intention of a cook or judgments of authenticity by some experts (Borghini 2015). So, some mind-dependent facts are needed to establish facts about dishes, *qua* dishes, and in particular to determine that a dish is an instance of a recipe. This is a *constructivist* take on individuating recipes and their instances moving from decisions about dishes.

Second, the kind of *priority* that dishes enjoy over recipes has to be specified. This might be *epistemic* or *metaphysical*. In the first case, dishes come first in the sense that they are providers of epistemic access to the taste of a recipe. Our being acquainted with the tastes of the dishes that are instances of a recipe R puts us in the position to tell the taste (or tastes) of R. In the second case, dishes come first in the sense that facts about dishes are more fundamental than, and thus determine, facts about recipes—independently of what we know. So, a recipe R has a taste or a set of tastes in virtue of the fact that the dishes that count as instances of R have a certain taste or set of tastes.

Third, the *acquisition* relation must be better spelled out. The most pressing question is whether this is a *sui generis* relation or can, instead, be cashed out in terms of some more familiar relation, which would be preferable.

The different stances one might take on these three sets of issues, when combined, deliver different views and as many different ways of pursuing and developing a dishes-come-first approach to account for the relation between recipes and taste.

## 5 Conclusion

---

<sup>8</sup> For a review of different version of realism and critiques see Borghini (2015).

My general aim in this paper has been to bring to the foreground some general questions concerning the relation between taste and recipes, which has not been object of scrutiny so far. I have tackled the issue from the angle of the specific question as to whether recipes have their taste essentially, just by being the recipes they are. I offered a negative reply to this question. First, I have reconstructed the view, which I have called essentialism. Then, I have discussed different versions of it and argued that none of them is really satisfying. Hence, I have concluded that taste is not an essential property of a recipe or something that depends on its essence.

What is the relation between recipes and taste then? In the final part of the paper, I sketched what I take to be the beginning of a reply to this question. My proposal has been to overturn the recipes-come-first perspective presupposed by essentialism in favor of a dishes-come-first one, on which taste properties are primarily properties of dishes that a recipe has only derivatively. This approach looks more promising, especially because it puts us in the position to explain how the same recipe can be associated with different tastes and can change and evolve taste-wise. Finally, I have offered a quick survey of the open questions for the suggested approach that set the agenda for future research.

One final comment. If my remarks are on the right track, then they might interestingly impinge on the important question concerning the relation between recipes and dishes, at least in the following sense: views that assume that dishes are prior to, or as fundamental as, recipes are better positioned to explain how recipes relate to some types of gustatory profile. This might score a point in favor of those views. However, whether or not this is a decisive point cannot be established here: once again, it is material for future research.<sup>9</sup>

## References

Anderson, J. (1985). 'Musical Kinds', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25: 43–9.

Block, N. (1990). 'Inverted Earth', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4: 53–79.

---

<sup>9</sup> For very useful comments on previous drafts and fruitful discussions on this topic, I wish to thank Andrea Borghini and Patrik Engisch. For their feedbacks on the Introduction, I am grateful to a bunch of friends, inside and outside of philosophy—especially, Jo Ahlberg, Giulia Barison, Marco Coratolo, Enzo D'Armenio, Cristian Mariani, and Eleonora Tomo. Preparatory materials for this paper were presented at a conference on recipes held in Milan in December 2018: I am grateful to the audience for their questions and remarks.

- Borghini, A. (2011). 'What Is a True *Ribollita*? Memory and the Quest for Authentic Food', in T. Piazza (Ed.), *Secret and Memory in the Information Age*. Porto: Afrontamento.
- Borghini, A. (2012). 'On Being the Same Wine', *Rivista di Estetica*, 51: 175–192.
- Borghini, A. (2014a). 'Geographical Indications, Food, and Culture', in P. B. Thomson & D. M. Kaplan (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*. Berlin: Springer.
- Borghini, A. (2014b). 'Authenticity in Food', in P. B. Thomson & D. M. Kaplan (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*. Berlin: Springer.
- Borghini, A. (2014c). 'Substantial Equivalence', in P. B. Thomson & D. M. Kaplan (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*. Berlin: Springer.
- Borghini, A. (2015). 'What Is a Recipe?' *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 28: 719–738.
- Byrne, A. (2020). 'Inverted Qualia', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/qualia-inverted/>.
- Dodd, J. (2007). *Works of Music. An Essay in Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dodd, J. (2010). 'Confessions of an Unrepentant Timbral Sonicist', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50: 33-52.
- Evans, G. (1982). *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korsmeyer, C. (1999). *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Liem, D.G. and C.G. Russell (2019). 'The Influence of Taste Liking on the Consumption of Nutrient Rich and Nutrient Poor Foods', *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 6, 174.
- Loar, B. (1997). 'Phenomenal States: Second Version', in N. Block, O. Flanagan, G. Guzeldier (Eds.), *Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lycan, W. (2018). 'What Does Taste Represent?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (1): 28–37.
- Meskin, A. and J. Robson (2015). 'Taste and Acquaintance', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 73 (2): 127–139.
- Peacocke, C. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Richardson, L. (2013). 'Flavour, Taste and Smell,' *Mind and Language*, 28: 322–41.
- Shoemaker, S. (1982). 'The Inverted Spectrum', *Journal of Philosophy*, 79: 357–81.

- Smith, B. (2009). *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, B. (2013). 'The Nature of Sensory Experience: The Case of Taste and Tasting', *Phenomenology and Mind*, 4: 293–313.
- Smith, B. (2015). 'The Chemical Senses', in M. Matten, *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Todd, C. (2018). 'Tasting in Time: The Affective and Temporal Dimensions of Flavour Perception', *The Monist*, 101(3): 277–93.
- Wolterstorff, N. (1980). *Works and Worlds of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.