
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

What decides our taste?



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Phil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Phil.

Beth

And I'm Beth. Now, let's talk about food.

Phil

OK. What food do you love? What food do you hate? If you ask around, you'll soon see there's no right or wrong answer – it's all a question of taste.

Beth

But our taste, it turns out, isn't simply a matter of opinion. Rather, scientists have discovered that taste is influenced by our genes and DNA. So, in this programme we'll be asking, what is taste? Why can't we agree on it? And is it worth listening to experts whose job is to tell us what to eat and drink? And, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Phil

Great, but first I have a question for you, Beth. A good way of finding out about British tastes is with the nation's best-loved snack, crisps. So, what is the most popular flavour of crisps in the UK? Is it:

- a) salt and vinegar?
- b) cheese and onion? or,
- c) prawn cocktail?

Beth

I'm going to guess cheese and onion.

Phil

OK, Beth, I'll reveal the answer later in the programme. Science's understanding of how taste works started only 25 years ago with the discovery of taste receptors, cells located in the taste buds on your tongue.

Beth

But people's taste is unique to them. What tastes sweet to me, might taste sour or salty to someone else, and this is because of differences in the receptors we're born with. In other words, taste is partly genetic. Here's Danielle Reed, researcher at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia explaining more to BBC World Service programme, 'The Food Chain':

Danielle Reed

...when we first started doing genetic studies, we really just confined ourselves to looking at a few Europeans, people of European ancestry. And so, our understanding of the broad diversity of humans on the planet was extremely limited. We are **broadening our horizons** and studying people of Asian and African ancestry, and that has really opened up the knowledge that people are much more diverse than we ever realised...

[...]

Ruth Alexander

And what you're saying is, "No, taste isn't a matter of opinion, it's a matter of biology".

Danielle Reed

Exactly and we wouldn't... you know, for our friends who are **colour-blind**, we wouldn't **chastise** them for not being able to see red or for dressing in colours we don't appreciate, but we feel very free to criticise our friends' sense of taste.

Phil

It was only when scientists looked outside Europe to the rest of the world that they realised the diversity of human taste. Danielle says they **broadened their**

horizons, they investigated something in a new way to increase their knowledge and understanding of it.

Beth

Danielle compares taste to another genetically controlled condition, being **colour-blind** or unable to see the difference between certain colours like green and red. You wouldn't **chastise** – criticise or punish - someone for being **colour-blind**, so why criticise someone's taste?

Phil

But, if scientists are telling us taste is largely genetic, what about restaurant critics and wine connoisseurs, people whose job it is to tell us what to eat and drink? Are their opinions any better than our own? Here's David Kermode, wine judge for the International Wine and Spirits Competition, speaking with Ruth Alexander for BBC World Service's, 'The Food Chain':

Ruth Alexander

Scientists have established that taste is individual and to a large extent actually genetic. So, I wonder, does that render the wine competition a **pointless** exercise?

David Kermode

No. I mean, **I would say that wouldn't I?** But of course, individual taste is **subjective**. We all have our own personal prejudices in whatever sphere of life you want to go into, but we are encouraged, I mean ordered almost, to park those prejudices.

Beth

Since people's tastes are naturally different, Ruth asks if wine competitions are **pointless**, without purpose and a waste of time. Being a wine judge, David, of course disagrees, using the phrase, 'but **I would say that, wouldn't I?**' This phrase means something like, 'of course I would say that'. It implies there's some reason that what the speaker is saying is obviously biased towards them.

Phil

David admits that taste is **subjective**, based on personal opinions and feelings rather than on facts.

Beth

I think it's time to reveal the answer to your question, Phil.

Phil

Right. I asked for Britain's most popular flavour of crisp, and you said, cheese and onion which was... the correct answer! OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned in this programme starting with the phrase to **broaden or expand your horizons** meaning 'to explore something in a new way which increases your knowledge and understanding of it'.

Beth

To **chastise** means to strongly punish or criticise.

Phil

A **colour-blind** person is unable to distinguish certain colours especially greens and reds.

Beth

Something which is **pointless**, has no purpose or meaning and is a waste of time.

Phil

The phrase **I would say that wouldn't I?** is a tag question meaning, 'of course I would say that'.

Beth

And finally, if something is **subjective**, it's influenced by personal beliefs or feelings, rather than based on facts. Once again, our six minutes are up. Goodbye for now!

Phil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

broaden (or expand) your horizons

investigate something in a new way in order to increase the range of your knowledge, understanding or experience

chastise

strongly punish or criticise

colour-blind

unable to see the difference between certain colours, especially green and red

pointless

without purpose or meaning, and a waste of time

I would say that, wouldn't I?

of course I would say that; used to imply there's some reason that what the speaker is saying is obviously biased towards them

subjective

based on personal opinions and feelings rather than on objective facts