

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2012-09 ***By Nabil Mailloux***

This article is brought to you by 'Malt Maniacs'; an international collective of more than two dozen fiercely independent malt whisky aficionados. Since 1997 we have been enjoying and discussing the pleasures of single malt whisky with like-minded whisky lovers from all over the world. In 2010 our community had members from 15 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Taiwan, Australia and South Africa. You can find more details on: www.maltmaniacs.org.



Super-tasters

Could you be one?

While visiting friends in California, ca. 2001, we were making our way from San Francisco to Monterrey, a minor road-trip. However, along the way, we stopped for lunch, and as usual, my friend Sally and I rolled our eyes while trying to select a restaurant that Dave could stomach. You see, Dave had a peculiar diet. It consisted of the Fries Group, the Chocolat Group, the Burger Group, the Pizza Group (no veggy toppings), and the Soda Group. It had been a source of bitterness for our more cosmopolitan palates for some time. Occasionally, we even cheated on him and went out to dinner without him!

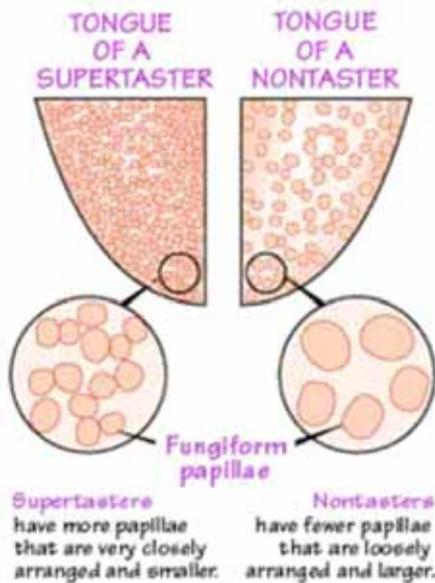


This time, as we sat down at a rather bland diner, serving fare à la Americana, Dave tried to explain why he had not been able to broaden his menu over the years. "I am a super-taster", is what he offered. We were rather stunned at the obvious irony of this odious proposition. Dave was anything but an adventure-seeking foodie. But what Dave had proposed was a theory that was beginning to get traction in the food sciences, that there were people with different taste buds, and this had the possibility of explaining their rather picky food preferences.

I have heard two different theories on this. The first says that there is one additional taste in addition to sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. Since only a small group of people possess this additional taste sense, they have no way of sharing it with others, or describing it, because for the most part, other people cannot share in their sense experience. Sort of like trying to get a colour-blind person to describe what they see, blue or red. Is it blue that they see or red? Or is it another colour altogether? Nonetheless, it is this fifth sense that lends an unpalatable taste to some foods, and hence their pickiness.

The second, and more thoroughly quantified theory, is that of super-tasters who possess a far greater density of taste receptors on their palates. This increased density then leads them to have a





lower threshold of detection for all flavours, and they taste everything more intensely. This means that if there is any bitterness, it is amplified by their taste buds to the point that they find the food unpalatable.

So who exactly is a super-taster? Well, your taste buds are found in clusters housed in pink projections on your tongue called fungiform papillae. The higher the density of pink dots, the closer you are to super-taster status. Approximately 50% of people are “normal, average” tasters. They measure approximately 10-20 clusters/cm². Now, there are also “low” tasters, they measure around 5 clusters, but if you measure over 25, you possess a super-power, the power of super-tasting!

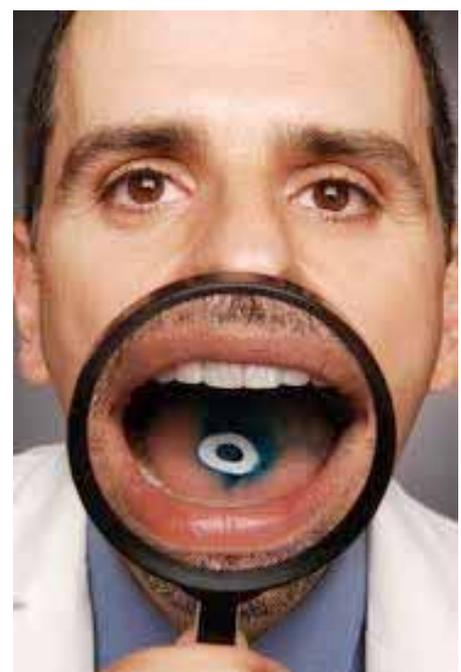
This newfound superpower may not be all it's cracked up to be. Super-tasters taste everything more intensely, and while you might think this is an advantage, it may not be. This means that they taste

everything - the good, the bad, the ugly - more intensely. That is not to say all of these flavours are amplified equally either, there may be a bias towards one of the basic flavours. If that bias is towards bitter, you may be in trouble because you probably find yourself not appreciating dark coloured veggies that are so good for you like broccoli, brussel sprouts, endives, and various lettuces.

On an evolutionary note, one might wonder what the advantage might be for a super-taster. Well, as it turns out, the bitter taste often accompanies what the brain senses as “poison”. So super-taster hunter gatherers would have had an advantage as they would have required smaller samples of food before concluding that they may be poisonous. They would be able to make that determination with fewer incidences of poisoning. However, on the flip side, many foods with a bitter taste also contain many phytochemicals which are bitter, but also powerful anti-carcinogens. So it is not clear if this mutation tips the scales in favour of having the mutation.

So what does this have to do with whisky? Well anyone who has tasted whiskies knows that you can find all of the basic flavours in a dram. If you happen to be bitter-biased, whisky may be less than an appetizing proposition. Does super-tasting mean that you are a better taster, perhaps, but it may also mean that your dram may benefit from the addition of more water than the average person. By diluting your sample, you are smoothing out the flavours, allowing your palate to explore the subtleties rather than being overwhelmed. This concept is interesting as it fits well with the accepted notion of “everyone adds water to their whisky according to taste.” On the other hand, if you are a low taster, perhaps you would benefit from a cask-strength whisky, or at least higher than 40% ABV, to properly stimulate your palate.

So how do you determine if you're super-taster? There is an easy test, developed by Dr. Linda Bartoshuk, a renowned University of Florida taste researcher, who first coined the term super-taster. First, apply to daubs of blue food colouring to either side of the tip of your tongue. Then place a piece of paper with a standard hole punch between the two daubs. The blue food



colouring will leave the pink clusters where the taste buds are housed uncoloured. Count the number of dots within the circle.

Other tests include mixing saccharin in water and seeing if you are in the sweet, bitter, or in between category. Bitter indicates super, sweet indicates low, and a tie indicates average tasters. The other test has been to put a drop of PROP (not easy to find), a component of thyroid medication, on the tongue. Most people can't taste it, but super-tasters find it very bitter.

I performed the blue dye test on myself, and my wife, who is quite picky. When I counted the number of clusters on my tongue, I counted around 18, placing me in the average group. I was interested to see where my wife would fall. Now it was harder to count, but that was because the density of clusters was so high, as I suspected, a super-taster at well over 30. She also, without prompting, complained quite vocally about how bitter the dye was, I only noticed a trace of bitterness.



It is fascinating to contemplate how topography of our palate can influence our preferences for food and drink. Is this why my wife's taste tends towards the sweet side for wines and avoids "oaked" chardonnays? How would a super-taster perceive peaty flavours and aromas? What are the consequences on the olfactory side of this equation? Are super-tasters also super-sniffers? And would it be interesting if the Malt Maniacs who judge the awards were to perform this test, and perhaps even post this metric as part of their profile?

At the end of the day, it is interesting to think that science may be able to predict which whisky is best suited to an individual. However, experience also counts for something, and deliberate practice tasting and appreciating are still paramount in the evaluation of any food or beverage. As for being a super-taster, I think this is one superpower I can do without!

A few selected malts for those who might fall into one of the three categories:

Low tasters:

Glenfarclas 105 (60%, OB, 700ml, ca. 2007, old tall tin)

C: Dark amber N: Antique furniture polish, stewed fruit, orange zest, dry sherry, christmas spices, nutmeg and allspice. P: Subtle sweetness, alspice and cinnamon spice over the whole palate. F: finishes on tobacco and leather. **Score: 86 points.**

Glenmorangie Astar (58%, OB, 700 ml, ca. 2009)

C: bright gold N: Boatloads of bananas, which is what Glenmorangie bourbon matured always gives me. Slightly flowery, the vanilla is trying to peak through. Hard to believe it is cask strength. Addition of water opens up more banana and bubble gum, as well as vanilla. P: Sweet, fruity, sweet apples, apricots, and yes, bananas. Nice oak spice all over the palate.

Water brings out more sweetness and vanilla, creme brulee. Finish: Malty vanilla.
Comments: I love the purity of this stuff as well as the quaffability at cask strength. This is a favourite among my friends. Score: **87 points**.

Medium tasters:

The Laddie Classic Ten (46%, OB, 750 ml, 2010)

C: Gold N: A little closed off at full strength, though there is more peat than would be expected. With water, more fruity and malty notes come out. Pears, ripe apples, alongside some more malty barley notes, some of the old biscuity notes. Also some mineral, wet gravel. P: Sweet, with mild spice over the palate. Some peat reek emerges at the end, sort of like HP 12. Minty and refreshing, some citrus also present, lemons, very little vanilla. F: Getting pepper and peat at the end. Clean and refreshing. Comments: I don't know why they bothered to print "unpeated" on the tin. The first thing anyone senses off of this 10 yo is the peat. It is muted by the addition of water, allowing the more fruity and malty notes to shine. Needs water in my opinion, just a bit. I quite liked this, but was confused by the marketing. They successfully struck out and redefined what this whisky can be. **Score: 83 points**.

Super-tasters:

Macallan Elegancia 12 yo (40%, OB, 1L, 2009)

C: medium amber N: prominent sherriness, Christmas spices, nutmeg, cinnamon, somewhat malty, orange zest. Later develops a hint of match sulfur. P: light body, spicy at the front, youthful. Cinnamon heart candy, peppery. F: peppery, hot cinnamon. Comments: the palate is a little fractured. Not sure what the message in this malt is supposed to be. Pleasant enough to impress newbies. Nice intro malt. **Score: 78**

Coleburn 14 yo (43%, Signatory, 50 ml, 1997)

C: Straw. N: Waxy, oxidized apples, flowers: lillies, ripe melon. P: nice sweetness, spice at the front, malty, biscuity. WW: a little minerality and woodiness coming through, more malty and vanilla, creamy, buttery. Finish: a little shortish on beer like malty notes. **Score: 78 points**.



Nabil Mailloux hails from Kingston, Ontario, Canada, a town that likes to celebrate *almost* becoming our nation's capital. He is originally from southwestern Ontario, a town that is also known as South Detroit (Windsor), the automotive manufacturing capital of Canada. He holds a Master's degree in organic chemistry from Queen's University, Canada. While in the Quiet Pub at Queen's University, he was introduced to the world of single malt whisky by his good friend John Morgan. That very same Morgan also convinced him to buy a hogshead of whisky with him, thus forever changing his life. As a result, he has become obsessed with nosing, tasting and evaluating whisky. He eagerly awaits 2014, the bottling date for his cask. He also wonders what he's going to do with his share of the whisky...