

Tasty meal isn't just about the food

By Maanvi Singh, NPR

What makes the perfect meal?

Most of us might envision a specific dish, or a certain ingredient – a fine steak cooked medium-rare, grandma's chicken curry or mom's hearty ratatouille.

Charles Spence thinks about the food, for sure. But he also thinks about everything else: the color and size of the dinnerware, the music playing in the background and the lighting in the dining room.

That's because Spence, an experimental psychologist at Oxford University, has dedicated his career to studying how our environment affects the way we experience food and drink. He has found, for example, that the weight and color of our utensils can affect how sweet or salty a food tastes. And people tend to enjoy the same dish more when it has a longer, more descriptive name.

In "The Perfect Meal: The Multisensory Science of Food and Dining", Spence and psychologist Betina Piqueras-Fiszman from Wageningen University in the Netherlands explore how even the most minute adjustments can enhance the dining experience.

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