

Diaz & Swahn Are Using Sound to Change the Way Your Food Tastes

By Jennifer Marston - May 22, 2018



Sound: the final frontier, at least when it comes to your food.

While it's pretty obvious why the other four senses can enhance a meal at a restaurant, there's less research on the role of sound, probably because its effect on food isn't immediately apparent.

The folks at Stockholm, Sweden-based Diaz & Swahn want to change that. The company uses a mix of sensory science, business, and marketing expertise to help food companies with product development and growth. And while restaurants aren't the only focus area, they definitely stand to benefit from this approach to doing business, and some already are.

"Understanding sensation and perception, as well as 'talking taste' are vital to the future of food," co-founder and Creative Director Johan Swahn explained to me.

Diaz & Swahn provides a number of different services food businesses can take advantage of, from simple talks and workshops to **sensory testing** and marketing for products. Swahn and his colleague Asgeir Nilsen also run the New Sense Lab, a research initiative that studies sensory

experiences within food and health and is part of the University of Örebro's Department of Culinary Arts & Meal Science.

The kind of work Diaz & Swahn do is helping make sound as important a sense in the overall food experience as, say, the look or feel of a food. For instance, researchers have found that **potato chips taste better when they sound crunchier**.

Swahn and his company take that idea one step further, however, exploring the ways sound can actually alter the taste of food, or at least the perceived taste. This is sometimes referred to as “sonic seasoning,” and the idea is that by changing one sensory area of the human body, you can change perception in another. So if those potato chips happen to be a little old, playing a crunching sound at a loud volume can **actually make the stale chips taste fresher**.

Restaurants, of course, are not going to throw the sound of crunching potato chips on the house speakers during the dinner rush, and that's fortunately not the only way to influence taste. Swahn explains that listening to softer, smoother music can “increase the perceived sweetness of a product,” whereas sharper, edgier sounds or music will increase saltiness or bitterness.

A growing abundance of research out there underscores music's influence over the perception of taste, from **Swahn's own work** at the New Sense Lab to to the findings of **Oxford University professor Charles Spence**, to British Airways **Sound Bites program**, which pairs pop music with the different meal courses. Because apparently rock music will enhance the quality and flavor of wine and Madonna's high-pitched tones will make your dessert taste sweeter.

“It's of course more complex than that but it gives a general idea of how sound can affect taste without actually changing the content,” Swahn says. “[Sensory science] offers lots of interesting possibilities for the future, such as creating healthier food habits (lowering sugar or salt contents but maintaining an acceptable taste) or improving the meal experience for the sick or elderly, who often lose appetite and who's tastebuds diminish with age.”

Several restaurants are already implementing these ideas into their overall business. “Today the most advanced sensory plays are found in high-end restaurants,” says Swahn. He cites **Enigma in Barcelona**, **Ultraviolet in Shanghai**, and UK restaurant **The Fat Duck**, which was one of the first places to experiment with sensory science and taste.

However, fast-casual places are now also playing with the senses to alter design, form, function, and color to create what Swahn calls “visual cravings.” And according to him, sound could be a

hugely valuable resource to these types of restaurants: “Fast-food chains are the ones that I feel could really benefit from using sound. Imagine if one could reduce sugar or salt but enhance the flavour with the right background music.”

Spotify has already teamed up with McDonalds in Sweden to improve the fast-food chain’s music, and while the sensory and taste elements aren’t yet there, the partnership is, according to Swahn, “the first step in using music to improve the fast-food experience.” Should it prove successful, we can expect to see this kind of thinking applied to restaurants of all sizes and styles.

Correction: An earlier version of this post stated The Fat Duck was in Australia. The post has been updated.

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Jennifer Marston

Jennifer (Jenn) is a writer, editor, and ghostwriter based in NYC. At The Spoon she covers agtech, sustainable food issues, and restaurant tech. She is obsessed with IKEA.