

Snap, Crackle, Pop: The Sonic Pleasures Of Food

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Abstract

After a rockin' (and seriously informative) series of podcasts from Leonard J. Paul, a Drrty South banger dropped by SO! Regular Regina Bradley, and a screamtastic meditation from Yvon Bonenfant, our summer Sound and Pleasure series serves up some awesomeness on a platter this week with the return of Steph Ceraso, who makes us wish all those food pics on instagram came with

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After a rockin' (and *seriously* informative) [series of podcasts](#) from [Leonard J. Paul](#), a Drrty South banger dropped by SO! Regular [Regina Bradley](#), and a screamtastic meditation from [Yvon Bonenfant](#), our summer ***Sound and Pleasure*** series serves up some awesomeness on a platter this week with the return of [Steph Ceraso](#), who makes us wish all those food pics on instagram came with recordings. Take a big bite out of this! --JS, Editor-in-Chief

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Lightly I tap the burnt surface with a cold metal spoon until it cracks; it fractures like a fine layer of sugary glass; silent, smooth custard mixes with the sticky sweet crunch of the caramelized shards.

An otherwise bland and unmemorable dessert, *crème brûlée* is always my go-to treat. The sonic pleasures of this indulgence keep me coming back: the tapping, cracking, crunching.

Though the taste and visual presentation of food usually get most of the hype, it's no secret that sound can amplify the enjoyment and delight of eating. Indeed, sound has become an increasingly important ingredient in the design, advertising, and experience of food: from "junk" food to gourmet dining. What is especially fascinating and disconcerting about this strategic use of sound is the powerful connection between pleasure and sensory manipulation. To my mind, the myriad ways sound is employed to manipulate perceptions of food underscores the need to pay more attention to when, how, and why sound influences our thoughts, feelings, and sensory experiences.



“Crack” by Flickr user Gabriela Castillo, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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Food engineers and marketing teams have been taking advantage of the pleasures of sound for years. Rice Krispies’ “Snap, Crackle, Pop” trademark has been around [since the late 1920s](#). And of course there are Pop Rocks, my favorite sounding retro product. The carbonated sugar crystals were [invented in the 1950s](#), but thanks to commercials that celebrated the candy in all of its sonic glory, Pop Rocks’ popularity reached a fever pitch in the 1970s and it’s still going strong today. The official [Pop Rocks website](#) boasts that the product continues to be the “leading popping candy brand worldwide.”



<https://youtu.be/MNxRMtwoSxM>

Sound is a crucial part of the pleasurable experience of food's packaging, too. Consider Pringles' famous "Once you pop you can't stop" slogan. A neatly stacked chip cylinder with a pleasant-sounding lid is marketed as a refreshing alternative to crinkly chip bags.

Designing sound for the things that contain food may seem like a silly marketing gimmick, but the sounds of packaging can make or break the product. For instance, in an attempt to make its SunChips brand more environmentally friendly, in 2010 Frito-Lay introduced a compostable chip bag. Consumers found it to be [ridiculously noisy and complained](#). The bag had so many haters, in fact, that a facebook group called "SORRY I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER THIS SUN CHIPS BAG" attracted nearly 30,000 fans. Sales fell, and the financial loss caused Frito-Lay to go back to the un-environmentally friendly bags. Just this year, the company introduced [yet another version](#) of the compostable bag. It's too early to tell if consumers will deem its sound acceptable.



<https://youtu.be/HRWeITDdHJM>

While many companies strive to hit the right note when it comes to the pleasurable sounds of food and its packaging, recent research on taste and sound has been more focused on how external sounds affect the experience of eating. In a [noteworthy study](#), the food company Unilever and the University of Manchester found that the experience of sweetness and saltiness in food decreased in relation to high levels of background noise (perhaps one of the reasons that airplane food generally sucks). They also identified a correlation between the increased volume of background noise and the eater's perception of crunchiness and freshness.

Additionally, the Crossmodal Laboratory at Oxford University run by professor Charles Spence got [a lot of press](#) for discovering that low-pitched sounds tend to bring out bitter flavors while high-pitched sounds heighten the sweetness of food. Go grab a snack (chocolate or coffee work best) and you can [try this experiment for yourself](#).

Armed with scientific knowledge, many chefs and entrepreneurs have been teaming up to put these ideas into practice. For a limited time London restaurant House of Wolf served what they called a "[sonic cake pop](#)." The treat came with a phone number that presented callers with the

choice of pushing 1 for sweet (to hear a high-frequency sound) and 2 for bitter (to hear a low-frequency sound). The experiment was a success. People seemed to want to hear their cake and eat it too. The [same Guardian article](#) reports that Ben and Jerry's plans to put QR codes on its packaging so that customers can use their smartphones to access sounds that compliment the flavor of ice cream they are eating.



"Sound of the Sea" by Flickr user Cennydd Bowles, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

For some, making sound a more prominent feature of eating experiences is more than a fun experiment or savvy marketing strategy: it's a full-blown artistic performance. World-renowned chef Heston Blumenthal uses sound to draw attention to the holistic sensory experience of dining. His dish "[Sound of the Sea](#)," for example, consists of seafood, edible seaweed, tapioca that looks like sand, decorative shells, and an iPod so that diners can listen to the sounds of the ocean.

Blumenthal has also performed [sound experiments](#) while eaters spooned up his bacon and egg ice cream (Yep. That's a thing!). When the sound of bacon frying in a pan was played, people rated the bacon flavor of the ice cream to be more intense than the egg flavor, and vice versa when the sound was clucking chickens.

In a similar vein, Boston chef Jason Bond and composer Ben Houge have paired up to create [food operas](#), or what they call "audio-gustatory events." They use real-time musical scoring techniques based off of Houge's work in video games to design eating experiences that explicitly link sound and taste.

Clearly, when it comes to the pleasures (and displeasures) of eating, sound matters. I'll admit that I'm a fan of the more imaginative, experimental uses of sound in experiences like the food opera or Blumenthal's edible sonic creations. There is a sense of play and discovery in these designed experiences; and, people know what they are signing up for and willingly choose to participate. Such endeavors have the potential to heighten participants' sensitivity to how sound figures into eating and other kinds of everyday activities.



*“WWII Food Ad, Kellogg’s Rice
Krispies Cereal...” by Flickr user
Classic Film, CC BY-NC 2.0*

Yet, along with the [sonic branding](#) and marketing of edible products, these experiments raise some troubling questions about the relationship between pleasure and sensory manipulation: When is it wrong or unethical to use sensory manipulation to create pleasurable experiences? At what point does manipulation become pleasurable? Is all pleasure a form of manipulation?

Perhaps more significantly, the ways that people are applying scientific knowledge about sound and taste opens up another can of worms: What are the implications of trying to standardize pleasurable sounds via commercial products? What kinds of bodies are invited to participate in pleasurable sensory experiences, or not? I’m thinking particularly of individuals who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, or who have different cultural cues when it comes to recognizing a sound as “pleasurable.”

The sounds of food do not necessarily have to be engineered to be pleasurable. However, because new information about the relationship between sound and other senses is being used to explicitly and implicitly manipulate our experiences, it seems that there is a real need for cultivating a keener, more critical sensory awareness. This means questioning when, how, and why sound is being employed to create pleasurable experiences in a range of products and environments; it means paying careful attention to the ways that sound interacts with all of our senses to influence everyday experiences. So, the next time you’re having what seems to be a simple “feel good” eating experience, be sure to open your ears along with your mouth.

Featured image by Flickr user [Wizetux](#), CC BY 2.0

Steph Ceraso received her doctorate in 2013 from the University of Pittsburgh, specializing in rhetoric and composition, pedagogy, sound studies, and digital media. In addition to being a three-peat guest writer for Sounding Out!, her work has been featured in *Currents in Electronic Literacy*, *HASTAC*, and *Fembot Collective*. She is also the coeditor of a special “Sonic Rhetorics” issue of *Harlot*. Her current book project, *Sounding Composition, Composing Sound*, examines how expansive, consciously embodied listening and sonic composing practices can deepen our knowledge of multimodal engagement and production. Steph will be joining the faculty in the English department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County this fall. You can find more about her research, media projects, and teaching at <http://www.stephceraso.com>.



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