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A-HEAD

A Chef Who Can't Smell? Covid Forces Some Creative Solutions

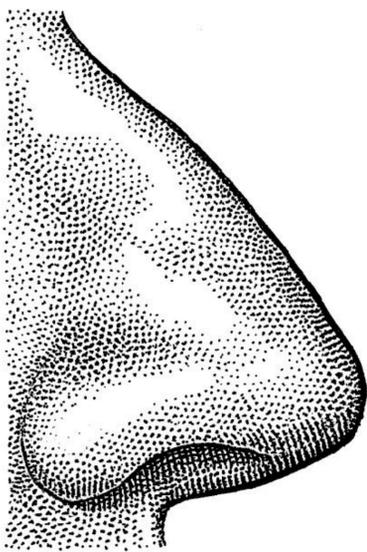
Food and wine professionals are trying new ideas to cope with changes in palates; 'eating chilies, chewing mint'



By Steve Garbarino | March 22, 2021

The first thing Tom Ramsey tasted after temporarily losing his ability to taste and smell was a tray of hospital food. For the New Orleans-based executive chef and certified sommelier, who contracted Covid in late January, the dish was sublime.

“I still couldn’t smell anything,” said Mr. Ramsey, who is 55. “But man, the food tasted delicious, fantastic. It was a pork stew with rice,” he recalls. “It gave me a new appreciation of taste.”



Consider that Mr. Ramsey usually taste tests dishes daily, such as duck confit crepinette (“orange zest, local exotic mushrooms, citrus gremolata in a roasted red pepper vinaigrette”), an appetizer at Atchafalaya, a white-tablecloth restaurant where he is chef and often recommends accompanying wines. He was optimistic. But after release from the hospital, his palate again diminished.

Mr. Ramsey wasn't ready to give up. The concept of "hell" for chefs and sommeliers is taste and smell loss. Palate-deprivation for them is akin to a musician losing his hearing.

Some chefs and sommeliers who found their taste and smell diminished from Covid are developing their own creative workarounds and coming up with ideas to resuscitate their senses.



Chef Tom Ramsey, right, at a picnic in 2015.
PHOTO: STUART RAMSEY

"To retrain my nose I'm constantly picking things up and looking for smells," said Mr. Ramsey. "And there is muscle memory, how things smelled on every shift, every second of every day." Some things he can both smell and re-create in his memory.

"For smells, citrus is one...rosemary, turmeric," he said. "I can smell the nutty smell you get off prosciutto, and the toasty smell when you cook a mushroom. Those are the things I'm looking for."

Mr. Ramsey, who is still on supplemental oxygen, is working on new ideas for restaurant recipes from home, with a temporary chef filling in for him. He said he also focuses on memories of smells of his childhood. "Growing up on the Mississippi Delta, I can evoke the specific smell when the wind picks up the mineral quality indicative of an incoming thunderstorm," he said. "It's a really strong touchstone of scent. You get the riverbanks, the decaying fish, the freshwater, the agricultural chemicals."

Since the pandemic began, doctors have puzzled over why the coronavirus causes as many as 80% of patients to experience anosmia, a temporary loss of smell. Most patients recover their sense of smell within a week or two. But a smaller subset lose their sense of smell for much longer, and when it returns, some of them develop parosmia, a condition in which their favorite foods and familiar scents have changed, doctors and researchers say.

Craving a glass of wine a month after recovering from Covid, Susann Crunden, a certified sommelier and restaurant manager in Seattle, said she finally took a gamble, having had no taste or smell for 35 days. In mid-January, she popped a Beaujolais "to gauge if I could taste it at all. All I got," she said, "was a sour astringent juice." Yet she said, "it was something."

Ms. Crunden, 37, cultivated her taste for wine while studying in Rome. “But since I was young, I was always the person to notice a smell, good or bad, when walking into a dining room,” she said.

After discovering she had lost her palate, she felt “just general disbelief,” she said. “I kept eating though, thinking to myself, ‘On this next bite I’ll taste something.’ I repeated that habit for weeks. I’ve been trying lots of things to awaken the palate: burnt citrus, eating chilies, chewing mint.”



Susann Crunden, center, has been trying to awaken her palate.
PHOTO: SUSANN CRUNDEN

Now, she said, she has slowly regained some sense of tastes she finds in wine, “specifically earthier notes, like tree bark, moss, cedar, smoke.” She said those smells are much more enhanced than she recalls pre-Covid.

“The limited taste that I have right now gives me hope. I believe I can retrain my palate, and I’m actually curious to see if my preferences in both wine and food change,” she said.

Ms. Crunden is focusing on the buying aspect of wine for her restaurant as she regains her palate, she said, relying on her training as a sommelier and trusted vendors.

“I’m still struggling with floral and fruit notes,” she said. She grew up in a beach town on the East Coast and still misses the smell of the Atlantic. “I used to find a lot of that briny aroma in Spanish and Sicilian whites. Now some wines taste like mud, and others, like nothing.”

For Julia Hinojosa Ham, a former sommelier, everything post-Covid tasted like “licking white paper.” She lost her senses of taste and smell around Thanksgiving due to the virus.

“For a good month I ate hot, hot jalapeños,” she said. She first noticed she couldn’t smell when she sprayed on her favorite perfume. “I wear Estée Lauder Belle,” said Ms. Hinojosa Ham, 50. “I couldn’t smell it.”

The Fairhope, Ala.-based veteran of the restaurant business, now a financial adviser, said she pines for getting her “original” palate back. “It’s been three months since I’ve regained both taste and smell. But now, an interesting thing: Everything tastes sweet to me—a glass of water, an olive. And I am not fond of anything sweet.”



Julia Hinojosa Ham, a former sommelier, said everything post-Covid tasted like 'licking white paper.'
PHOTO: JULIA HAM

But, she added, “I’ve learned to appreciate the senses I have.”

Braithe Tidwell, a sommelier and beverage director at Brennan’s, a French Quarter-based culinary destination known for its vast Champagne selection, lost her sense of smell following getting Covid in December. “When I lost my taste, I thought, ‘Uh-oh, I’m in trouble,’ ” she said.

Some taste resurfaced about 10 days after her initial symptoms, she said, and it was fully restored after a month.

Smell took longer. Three weeks after recovering from the virus, Ms. Tidwell still had no sense of smell at all.

She said she now has about 75% of her sense of smell back, adding, “I have good days and bad days, though.”

When she regains her full palate, she plans to treat herself to East Coast blue-point oysters with a bottle of Egly-Ouriet “Les Crayeres” Blanc de Noirs Brut, a Champagne from Northern France, which has “notes of toasted brioche, raspberry, Calamansi limes and candied pineapples,” Ms. Tidwell said.

“Now I’m managing it all better,” she said. “I’m relying upon my memory until my smell comes entirely back.”

Equipped with fresh oenological acumen, and her sense of taste, she reasons: “Maybe I can become a triple threat again: knowledge, taste, and yeah, smell. But two out of three isn’t bad.”

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