

## **Paying Attention to Taste**

***by Dana Bryan Jones***

I always feel like I'm very busy. And I am, but I'm also not always very efficient. So, it takes me longer to do some things than it takes some others to do the same things. In an effort to increase my efficiency sometimes I do things like read an article while I eat. Usually, that's OK and I never thought much about it until I found I couldn't taste something I'd never tried before while I was reading an article.

I cubed some chicken and sautéed it in olive oil with minced garlic. Then I added some herbs and spices to it and let it simmer. When that was done, I put it over a wild rice blend and melted some horseradish cheddar cheese over it. Oh, and then I covered the whole thing in gravy... pork gravy, to be a little more precise. I was really looking forward to this meal but as I ate it I decided it wasn't as tasty as I'd hoped it would be.

But then I realized that I didn't taste anything at all. Why was that? I wasn't coming down with anything, was I? I didn't think so. No sore throat, no achy body, no fatigue... what the...?

And then it occurred to me that I simply wasn't paying attention to it, I was reading an article. I was so focused on that article that, while I was sufficiently feeding my body, I wasn't present in

the meal I was supposed to be enjoying. I've read somewhere before that some athletes tend to eat solely to fuel their bodies and that sometimes they don't stop to enjoy it as well as they should. The same may go for really busy, driven people who eat only because they know they'll die if they don't. So, while a healthy diet is an important part of a healthy life I've read that it's also important to enjoy your food. Now I'm not saying that I think you can parlay enjoying daily fast food meals into good health, but it seems the enjoyment of the meal could be part of its 'nutritional' value. You won't find it on most labels, but you'll feel it from time to time especially if you have happy friends that you eat with. Some people may even feel it all of the time (I haven't met them yet but I'm not discounting the possibility of their existence).

In his book, *Eating Well for Optimum Health*, Andrew Weil quotes an article by Ronald Koetzsch wherein he had travelled to Germany and, while visiting a friend at the tail end of a particular holiday, their breakfast commenced with a beer. This breakfast was in a large hall with hundreds of people, many of whom had already been drinking beer, singing, talking, and laughing. And although it was far from part of his usual 'healthy' breakfast he seems to have opted for the 'when in Rome' attitude and went for it. Now this could be because the night before, everyone was eating, drinking, and being merry when he opted to drink juice and water and go to bed early so he could be refreshed and ready for the busy day ahead. But that's not how it went down: "Alas, such was not the case. I was groggy and out of sorts, and I felt alienated from the others. And they, despite going to bed full of food and vodka, were cheerful and brimming with energy."

The main breakfast that morning wasn't any closer to his usual 'healthy' fare: "...a deep-fried pork cutlet about the size of a Frisbee." But here comes the important part: "When I left, I was relaxed, happy, and so alert... I felt unusually energetic and ebullient that whole day and for days afterward... I look forward to my next breakfast of beer, pork cutlet, and song." What he seems to be saying is that enjoying the experience of the meal has something to do with how healthy it is. Again, I'm not saying that eating fast food, or beer and pork schnitzel, all of the time is actually healthy simply because you enjoy it. But paying some attention, some tribute, to the food that's before you and the environment (e.g., the place, the people, the occasion, all of the above, etc.) that you're enjoying it in can make a difference in how you feel while and after you consume it. I think it matters. I think it's important.

When I stopped reading that article and began eating my dinner, I really enjoyed it, it was delicious. The difference between a bland meal and a tasteful one, this time, was my attention. I had to be present with it. It seems I should try harder to experience my experiences.