

TRISKAIDEKA | 13 | UMAMI

13 Disciples:

Attended the Last Supper

13 Umami foods:

Potatoes | Seafood | Mushrooms | Soy sauce | Seaweed | Carrots | Sundried tomatoes | Smoked meat | Blue Cheese | Parmesan Cheese | Fermented fish sauce | Marmite | MSG

In the ancient scriptures of Hinduism, a man was described by the type of food he consumed. Is this religion of food continuing into a contemporary consumerist society in which we are all being consumed by what we eat?

Triskaidekaphobia is the fear of the number 13. Some believe that in the last supper, it was the Judas who was the 13th disciple to sit at the table. However to end this superstition, a group of 13 people gathered in 1881. With the alibi of dinner on Friday the 13th at 8:13 p.m., they dined in Room 13 of a cabaret club. Each guest walked under a ladder to enter the room and ate amongst piles of spilt salt. Each one survived.

On March 12th 1930, in India, there was the *Dandi March* led by Gandhi to obtain the right for salt on which the British had levied very high taxes. It was through a source of food, that a non-elitist campaign sought the support of people for a non-violence freedom movement. (Incidentally, on the first day of the successful Dandi March, Gandhi marched 13 miles)

Over the centuries, sources of food and food itself have been major issues in the lives of people – from the temperament and behaviour of an individual to mass reactions of a community or country.

How important or trivial are superstitions when it comes to taste and survival?

Food has hinged itself on historic happenings. Many contemporary artists create works that explore the emotions ignited by food; to validate the presence and absence of fairness; to shock, comfort and displace the audience; to nurture and splinter perceptions related to consumerism, food politics, industries and markets, culinary, hunger, gluttony, slaughter, agriculture, garbage and waste, buffets, gourmet and feasts. Contemporary art has developed an aspect of a response to situations that surround the artists and they respond to it through an aesthetic that is less obvious than an agitation, which makes one realise the critical positions of the situation of food.

Umami is popularly referred to as the fifth basic taste, boasting of the quality to guarantee the delicious element in food. The factor that describes a food as umami is the content of glutamates, which enhances the palatability of the substance it is combined with. While it comes naturally in some food, it is often used in the form of MSG (MonoSodium Glutamate = artificial umami crystals) to

enhance the flavour, where the presence of Umami is mild. This in turn raises the question of health, genetic induction, sustenance, agricultural politics and satiation extent.

It's not sweet, sour, bitter or salty – it's different, it's distinct, it's mouth-watering – it balances and enhances – it stands out, but blends in – it makes you think – it makes you experiment and explore – it's never enough, you must have more – UMAMI!

(Quite like the nature of demanding democracy and desire in consumerism!)

The right to food is a human right – how many in the world have access to it? How many can afford the luxury of selecting the umami factor? What about capitalism in the food industry and the unregulated consumerism? What is happy food – ice cream for lunch if one can afford it or a bowl of boiled rice for those who'll savour it? Organic or genetic? Real or artificial? Diet, hunger, starvation or famine? Choice, necessity or compulsive consumption?

These are constant questions that are being posed in relation to the democracy and monopoly of a basic human necessity. Is politics and governmental systems the umami that thrives on the consumption of population? Are they the MSG factor to the natural and genetically modified inductions?

Umami might not persist your senses immediately, but will leave a strong, lingering after-taste...like fermented fish sauce, a rich cheese pie...or the number 13 in democratic thinking.....

~ Veeranganakumari Solanki