

The buck starts here • 19 September 2010, 22:29:06 (South Africa)

# THE DAILY MAVERICK

Opinionista  
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## *That finger-licking, lip-smacking taste*

Monosodium glutamate sounds awful, but then, so does sodium chloride or folic acid or aspartame or lecithin. They all sound like the kinds of chemical that cause our rising cancer rates. Yet the most likely way they will kill you is to worry yourself to death.

For as long as they can remember, the Japanese have used seaweed to improve the flavour of food. They found that it produced "umami", or "good taste". Today, we would describe this taste as savoury or meaty.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kikunae Ikeda of the Tokyo Imperial University succeeded in isolating the ingredient in seaweed that produced this effect: glutamate. A company known as Ajinomoto, or "The Essence of Taste", began to produce this substance commercially.

Glutamate or its salts occur naturally in some foods, such as meat, tomatoes, some seafood, Asian seasonings such as soy sauce and fish sauce, and Italian foods such as anchovies and Parmesan cheese. It does for savoury foods what fat does in meat: it makes it taste better. When you grill a steak, one that contains more fat will be tastier, richer, and more full-flavoured. A low-fat steak may be healthier, but with the fat you sacrifice taste. This is why it is much nicer to fry or grill food with a little butter, fat or oil.

Like everything on the planet, glutamate, or its most common salt, monosodium glutamate (MSG) is a chemical. So is sodium chloride, which is common table salt. So, for that matter, is water. Denouncing something as "chemical" states the obvious. It is an uninformed and unthinking knee-jerk reaction based on something other than scientific fact.

Any chemical may be good for you, bad for you, or have no particular ill effects. MSG falls into the latter category, unless you're among the small number of people with a particular sensitivity or allergy to the substance.

It is fashionable nowadays to frown on food additives. Most are designed to improve the taste, texture, colour or shelf-life of food. Ironically, preservatives are a particular target of health-food nuts, although they significantly reduce food waste, reduce the cost of food, and ensure that fewer people get ill from consuming stale food.

Flavour enhancers such as MSG are even more harshly condemned, because of the supposedly lesser importance of taste over shelf-life. The benefits of a pleasant life, and enjoying one's food,

strike me as particularly important, but not so for those who denounce MSG as a harmful food additive used by greedy multinational corporations to exploit our weaknesses for profit.

Let's leave aside the anti-capitalist paranoia inherent in such views, and look only at MSG. For most people, it does no harm at all.

Katherine Zeratsky, a nutritionist at the prestigious Mayo Clinic, [sums it up as follows](#): "[R]esearchers have found no definitive evidence of a link between MSG and [a range of anecdotal] symptoms. Researchers acknowledge, though, that a small percentage of people may have short-term reactions to MSG. Symptoms are usually mild and don't require treatment."

The reactions are often associated with Chinese food, but that, too, is a fallacy. [Says the European Food Information Council](#):

"Despite a small number of persons reporting sensitivity to monosodium glutamate, scientific studies have not shown any direct link between monosodium glutamate and adverse reactions. Monosodium glutamate used to be blamed for the 'Chinese Restaurant Syndrome' because the first anecdotal report was made following consumption of a Chinese meal and monosodium glutamate is widely used in Asian cooking. Symptoms said to be experienced included burning sensations along the back of the neck, chest tightness, nausea and sweating. However, a double-blind controlled challenge of individuals claiming to suffer from the 'syndrome' failed to confirm monosodium glutamate as the causative agent. Other studies have found that allergic-type reactions after Asian meals are more often due to other ingredients such as shrimp, peanuts, spices and herbs."

Of course, the paranoiacs who promote expensive, bland health food, will suggest that the studies are flawed, the food safety regulators are in league with big business, and besides, aren't we all dying of cancer?

Let's analyse the cancer claim, since that is the most common reason for our distrust of "chemicals" in food or agriculture.

Are we really dying more often of cancer than we used to? If so, our more sophisticated, tastier, safer, more plentiful and more attractive food may account for it.

As it turns out, cancer rates did rise for some time until around 1990. In 1900, the three most common causes of death were influenza, tuberculosis and intestinal diseases. Two of these today rarely cause death, while influenza has become far less deadly. So instead of dying as a child of gastro-enteritis, or a 40-year-old of influenza, we carry on living. Of course, that exposes us to age-related conditions such as heart disease, stroke and cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, your chance of contracting cancer during your first 40 years is about one in sixty, but the chance of getting it after 40 is one in three.

Cancer incidence did indeed rise for most of the twentieth century, but simply by discounting smoking and aging, one can account for all of the increase seen until a few decades ago.

You see, the news gets better. Since 1990, according to the American Cancer Society, both the incidence and the death rate from cancer have been declining. This trend is evident in all the major cancer types: lung, prostate, breast and colorectal cancer.

If the chemicals we use in agriculture or as food additives are so bad for us, it sure doesn't show up at the hospitals.

Meanwhile, we have marvellous chemicals such as MSG and aspartame, which not only improve the taste of commercially-produced food, but help us to reduce our intake of things we know to be unhealthy: fat, sugar and salt.

MSG might not be very classy, but then, neither is Chinese take-away, tomato sauce or a cheese burger. Using additives such as MSG in food is much like painting over wood. Natural wood might be in better taste, but if the wood is cheap or you need a quick fix, a lick of paint might be just the thing to avoid the cost of throwing it out and replacing it with expensive hardwood harvested from an old-growth forest.

In a celebrated "documentary" entitled Super-Size Me, film-maker Morgan Spurlock eats at McDonalds fast-food outlets three times a day for 28 days. Gorging himself on 5,000 calories a day – more than twice the recommended food intake for a sedentary adult male – he finds he's putting on a pound a day. This seemed to epitomise the health risks of modern, additive-filled, fast food.

Some people, however, responded to what they believed was an unfair attack on a food company, and demonstrated the opposite: eat at McDonalds to get thin. In three months, eating only from the McDonalds menu, Merab Morgan, a 35-year-old construction worker and mother of two, lost 37 pounds. A Virginia man lost 80 pounds eating only McDonalds for six months. People who get fat on fast food, Morgan believes, aren't the innocent victims of commercial food production and chemical additives. They're simply people who make irresponsible choices.

Instead of fretting constantly about the food we eat, and worrying what constitutes "natural" and "organic", why not just be sensible? Everything, including the food itself, in moderation. The healthy human body is perfectly capable of dealing with a little toxicity – and even with powerful poisons such as cyanide, which occurs naturally in apples, mangos, peaches, cassava root and almonds.

Getting all neurotic about a nifty flavour enhancer, originally found in seaweed by the Japanese, is more likely to give you deadly hypertension than anything else.

Here, at the same time, we have an icon both of modern progress and prosperity, and of ancient Japanese natural lore. Here's to monosodium glutamate. Bon appétit. **DM**