A Loss of Taste

Somewhere along the way, my ability to savor certain foods has waned. Actually, it's done more than waned. In some cases, it has warped into a bizarro situation where items I've long loved now suddenly taste of bitter disappointment.

What food now tastes terrible to me? My beloved morning coffee (with the exception of peppermint-flavored java), several red wines I used to adore, some marinara sauces, toasted everything bagels, and even the heartiest of sandwiches, unless they're slathered with this spicy chipotle mayo I found.

Over the past two years, my ability to taste these favorites has gradually diminished. More recently, it significantly ebbed to the point where several food and drink items no longer taste familiar. The caramel-flavored coffee I bought the other week? It was outright disgusting in my mouth.

Is MS the culprit? My taste thief?

The first time I noticed something awry, I was eating a salty cracker. I expected it to be salty, only it wasn't. Figuring the lack of salt was just an anomaly for that one cracker, I tried another. Still couldn't taste the salt.

I started keeping track of things that didn't taste "right." Alarmingly, the coffee released unfamiliar bitter notes. I didn't have a stuffy nose or a sinus infection. I could breathe fine. But when I mentioned this to my neurologist, he said he'd never heard of MS-related taste problems and moved on to things he could quantify, like how long it took me to walk the length of a hall and back. I was left with my messed-up mouth and lots of questions.

I dove into research, eventually discovering a couple of articles written by folks with MS attesting to the fact that they'd experienced a loss of taste, including one written by a **classically trained chef.** In 2016, the **Journal of Neurology** published a study entitled "Taste dysfunction in multiple sclerosis" which concluded "a sizable number of MS patients exhibit taste deficits that are associated with MS-related lesions throughout the brain." Anywhere from 5 to 20 percent of MS patients have this problem, **the study found.**

So maybe I'm not imagining this after all.

After reading the study, I experienced crushing self-pity. I've had a dairy allergy for nearly two decades, one that makes pizza, butter, cheesecake, ice cream and most items on a restaurant menu off-limits because dairy is omnipresent in the American diet. I've tried to make do, substituting olive oil spreads for butter, using almond milk instead of cow's milk. I tell people the food I eat is good, but, if I'm being honest, the substitutes don't come close to the richness of dairy products, like that crisp sweetness of a grilled cheese sandwich which I crave.

Now, even the non-dairy things I can safely consume are tainted. In response, I've been seeking out strong flavors. I've been quite liberal with spices, sweeteners and/or salt in a vain attempt to discern a pleasing pop of flavor. I'm desperate for it.

Which brings me to another problem: I can no longer gauge how the dishes I'm cooking will taste to other people. This means when I'm not following recipe directions or making a dish **exactly** as I've always made it, I'm seasoning in the veritable dark. If I spice a dish to the point where I can detect something, it'll likely be way too sweet or salty for everybody else.

The food that has remained blissfully the same: citrus fruits. I delight in them as they explode with flavor and remind me that not **everything** has changed. Except my cooking. Consider yourself warned.