



# Targeting the 5 Senses in Your Dining Program

by Rocky Dunnam, CEC, CDM, CFPP



**I**n America, it's estimated that consumers dine out nearly 4.5 times each week. So it's reasonable to postulate that the average American has a solid understanding of what to expect when dining. The same is also true for our non-commercial clientele. There's an expectation that must be met during each and every meal service to ensure satisfaction.

Picture this:

## Scenario #1:

You walk into your favorite restaurant where you're immediately greeted by name and walked to your favorite

booth. Within seconds, your server arrives at the table with your drink-of-choice in hand. Knowing that you enjoy steak, she begins to describe tonight's feature: Steak Diane. You agree to the server's suggestion and order the featured fare. After a few minutes of conversation, your meal arrives steaming hot. You cut into your steak to find it's precisely the medium-rare that you ordered, and you begin to savor each bite. Your server stops by a few moments later to ensure that everything is exactly the way you like. Her inquiry is genuine, and her desire to correct any issues you may have is evident. You finish your meal, pay, and leave. Overall, you wouldn't change a thing



about this experience—which is why this is your favorite restaurant after all.

And now picture this:

#### **Scenario #2:**

You walk into a restaurant and there's an empty host stand. After standing for a couple of minutes, the host walks up and asks "how many?" You're taken to a table and left with menus that feel sticky to the touch. As you sit waiting for your server to arrive, you remove your coat. Because of the warm temperature, you begin sweating.

When the server finally arrives he asks what you want to drink, but you have to ask him to repeat himself because the music is too loud to hear what he is saying. Finally, you order. You eventually get your meal—after finishing your drink that hasn't been refilled. You attempt to cut into your steak only to notice that it's well done when you specifically ordered medium-rare. You look around for your server, and can't seem to locate him. You decide to leave cash on the table to pay for what you've consumed and walk out. And the fact that nobody bothers to ask how everything was as you pass by a group of employees near the front door merely adds salt to your wounds.

Both of the above scenarios have the *potential* to provide the same great, memorable experience. However, in Scenario #2, our senses notice the deficiencies (both

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perceptible and subconscious) of the eatery. Our experiences are shaped by how we perceive a variety of factors within them. When even one of our senses perceives a "mistake," our other senses begin to notice other details that we would have normally overlooked. This is why it is absolutely crucial as a foodservice manager to be in sync with each of these sensory applications, and adjust them according to our environment to confirm a satisfactory service experience.

Many in the healthcare industry question the importance of the sensory experience in our environment. For the most part, restaurant service and non-commercial counterparts are quite different. However, each and every one of our clients spent the vast majority of their lives dining out 4.5 times per week (on average), and have developed habits and expectations that they will bring into our non-commercial settings. And we need to accommodate.

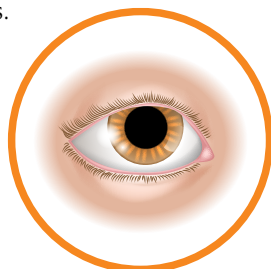
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Let's look at the sensory essentials.

## SIGHT

What do you see in the dining room? This area should be clean, organized, well lit, and color-coded to promote a positive dining experience. Studies have shown that color schemes dominated by *green* promote health and tranquility while stimulating a relaxed feeling. *Orange* and *yellow* are used to promote cheer and optimism. Conversely, colors can negatively affect perception also. Colors like *grey* are associated with solidarity, depression, and nothingness. *Red* signals a sense of urgency and aggression. While this may not be a great color to paint walls, red has been shown to improve consumption when used as a color for plate ware. When all else fails, *white* is known for cleanliness and sanitation.

Beyond our physical facilities, we need to be conscious of other things that affect our sense of sight. What contrasting colors are plated together? The addition of one or two colors to a plate brings a sense of appeal that is indisputable.



## HEARING

What do you hear in the dining room? You should hear a soft background, the pleasant sounds of service staff interacting, and muffled conversation from each table. Background sounds like musical instrumentals have been shown to promote the best response. This

may be something as simple as putting a jazz disc on repeat from a stereo in the dining room, to more complex ideas like streaming stations designed for dining.

## TOUCH

What do you feel when you enter the dining room? The temperature of the area should be slightly cooler than the other surrounding areas. This is easily the most “missed” sensory perception in dining establishments today. Our clientele tends to always be on the cold side. This may mean that you increase your dining room



temperature slightly, but never the same as or higher than surrounding areas. One study suggests that a temperature range of 69-72 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal for comfort in dining. You may find that you need to adjust according to your client preference.

What about other “touches?” The plate, much like the color issue, weighs in here. Anytime you're serving hot food, your food and plate should be hot. Likewise, cold food should be served on cold dishes. After studying this issue personally, I can confidently say that when you put hot food (155°F) on a room temperature (70°F) plate, the food quickly drops temperature (from 155°F to about 125°F or lower, depending on the type of food) within minutes.

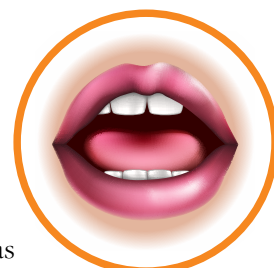
## SMELL

Smell is the sense most closely related to memory. What do you smell in the dining room? Hopefully you smell food! Smells like potpourri or air freshener should be avoided. Utilize items you have on hand for an appetizing smell.

For example, if you are baking bread, allow it to cool and/or store it in a noticeable area (nothing beats the aroma of fresh-baked bread). Another good tactic is to simply toss a couple cloves of garlic into a hot sauté pan and walk the pan through the dining room. The smell of garlic will linger for hours...and it's a welcoming aroma. But don't overdo.

## TASTE

What do you taste on your palate? This is easily the most studied, well-noticed sensory perception in food service, although I don't believe that it's any more or less important than the other four. Don't get me wrong, as a chef I fully understand the importance of flavor profiles. However, I've also seen many facilities cited for deficiencies beyond taste, flavor, and/or palatability. Ultimately, I can't advise you here on how to improve the taste of your cuisine in its entirety. So many variables go into the flavor profile, depth, and personality of each dish that I'd need an entire book to even begin to explain how you should operate. My advice is to taste, taste, and taste.





## Want to Learn More About Sensory Essentials?

Rocky Dunnam, CEC, CDM, CFPP will expand on this topic during his Regional Meeting session, "A Sense of Appeal: Targeting the 5 Senses." The May 5-6 ANFP Regional Meeting will take place at the Anaheim Marriott Suites, Anaheim, Calif. Dunnam will be a presenter both days.

Online registration is open at [www.ANFPonline.org/Events](http://www.ANFPonline.org/Events)

Sample during the cooking process, and taste the finished product before service. And then, if it doesn't taste great, don't serve it. Period.

While many don't ever openly note any of these perceptions, we all instinctively acknowledge when one or more of our senses signal us that something is "off." A foul smell is enough to dissuade anyone from eating a beautiful steak. It's almost impossible to sit comfortably in a sauna while sweating profusely. And sitting at a dining table in the middle of a medical office with nurses, doctors, and equipment cluttered around will surely have a negative impact on our meal. But when all the factors come together accurately, it's nearly impossible to have a

negative experience. We all experience food service in a commercial setting, and must learn to apply the concepts in our non-commercial setting today. **E**



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## Review Questions

### CULINARY CONNECTION

Reading *Targeting the 5 Senses in Your Dining Program* and successfully completing these questions online has been approved for 1 hour of CE for CDM, CFPPs. CE credit is available ONLINE ONLY. To earn 1 CE hour, purchase the online CE quiz in the ANFP Marketplace. Visit [www.ANFPonline.org/market](http://www.ANFPonline.org/market), select "**Publication**," then select "**CE article**" at left, then search the title "*Targeting the 5 Senses in Your Dining Program*" and purchase the article.



- What are the most basic five senses?
  - Taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing
  - Taste, sight, smell, direction, anger
  - Happiness, sadness, anger, disappointment, remorse
- How many times each week does the average American eat outside the home?
  - 2 times
  - 10 times
  - 4.5 times
- Which sense is most closely related to memory?
  - Direction
  - Touch
  - Smell
- What is the ideal temperature for a dining environment?
  - 60-65 degrees Fahrenheit
  - 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit
  - 69-72 degrees Fahrenheit
- How should you eliminate odors in your dining room?
  - Clean, sanitize, and allow natural food aromas to dominate
  - Potpourri
  - Commercial chemical fresheners
- If your food doesn't taste great...
  - Don't serve it
  - Serve it and try for better next time
  - Add hot sauce to cover the flavors
- When does the dining experience begin?
  - When you take your first bite of the appetizer
  - When you order your drink
  - When you first see the establishment, before any interaction

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