

More than meets the tongue

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Does orange juice taste sweeter if it's a brighter orange? A new study in the March issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* finds that the color of a drink can influence how we think it tastes. In fact, the researchers found that color was more of an influence on how taste was perceived than quality or price information.

"Perceptual discrimination is fundamental to rational choice in many product categories yet rarely examined in consumer research," write JoAndrea Hoegg (University of British Columbia) and Joseph W. Alba (University of Florida). "The present research investigates discrimination as it pertains to consumers' ability to identify difference—or the lack thereof—among gustatory stimuli."

Hoegg and Alba are the first to look at how individual attributes -- such as color, price, or brand -- can affect which products we prefer. The researchers manipulated orange juice by changing color (with food coloring), sweetness (with sugar), or by labeling the cups with brand and quality information. They found that though brand name influenced people's preferences for one cup of juice over another, labeling one cup a premium brand and the other an inexpensive store brand had no effect on perceptions of taste.

In contrast, the tint of the orange juice had a huge effect on the taster's perceptions of taste. As the authors put it: "Color dominated taste."

Given two cups of the same Tropicana orange juice, with one cup darkened with food coloring, the members of the researcher's sample

group perceived differences in taste that did not exist. However, when given two cups of orange juice that were the same color, with one cup sweetened with sugar, the same people failed to perceive taste differences.

"It seems unlikely that our consumers deliberately eschewed taste for color as a basis for discrimination," write the authors. "Moreover, our consumers succumbed to the influence of color but were less influenced by the powerful lure of brand and price information."

Source: University of Chicago

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