

Restaurant customers who pay more perceive the food as tastier

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Restaurateurs take note—by cutting your prices, you may be cutting how much people will like your food.

Researchers in nutrition, economics and consumer behavior often assume that taste is a given—a person naturally either likes or dislikes a [food](#). But a new study suggests [taste perception](#), as well as feelings of overeating and guilt, can be manipulated by price alone.

"We were fascinated to find that pricing has little impact on how much one eats, but a huge impact on how you interpret the experience," said Brian Wansink, Ph.D., a professor at the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University who oversaw the research. "Simply cutting the price of food at a restaurant dramatically affects how customers evaluate and appreciate the food."

The researchers teamed up with a high-quality Italian [buffet](#) in upstate New York to study how pricing affects customers' perceptions. They presented 139 diners with a menu that offered an all-you-can-eat buffet priced at either \$4 or \$8. Customers were then asked to evaluate the food and the restaurant and rate their first, middle and last taste of the food on a nine-point scale.

Those who paid \$8 for the buffet reported enjoying their food on average 11 percent more than those who paid \$4, though the two groups ate the same amount of food overall. People who paid the lower price also more often reported feeling like they had overeaten, felt more guilt

about the meal, and reported liking the food less and less throughout the course of the meal.

"We were surprised by the striking pattern we saw," said Ozge Sigirci, a researcher at Cornell University Food and Brand Lab who conducted the study. "If the food is there, you are going to eat it, but the pricing very much affects how you are going to feel about your meal and how you will evaluate the restaurant."

Public health researchers and health advocates have focused on how all-you-can-eat buffets influence people's eating habits. On the theory that such restaurants foster overeating and contribute to obesity, some advocates have proposed imposing special taxes on buffet consumers or restaurant owners.

The study did not directly address the public health implications of all-you-can-eat buffets, but the researchers said the results could offer lessons about how to optimize a restaurant experience. "If you're a consumer and want to eat at a buffet, the best thing to do is eat at the most expensive buffet you can afford. You won't eat more, but you'll have a better experience overall," said Wansink.

The study fits within a constellation of other work by Wansink and others offering insights about how health behaviors can be manipulated by small changes, such as putting the most healthful foods first in a display or using a smaller dinner plate.

"This is an example of how a really small change can transform how a person interacts with food in a way that doesn't entail dieting," said Wansink, who is author of *Slim by Design: Mindless Eating Solutions for Everyday Life*, an upcoming book about how design choices influence eating behavior.

Provided by Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

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