

Prologue: How it all began

Some readers might be curious to know a little about what inspired us to undertake this joint venture to unlock the secrets of umami and to put our findings together in a book. Like most Danes, we were very familiar with the four basic tastes, enshrined in Western literature for many centuries: sour, sweet, salty, and bitter. But the idea of a ‘fifth taste,’ one that has been known in the East for millennia, had not gained much traction in the circles we frequented, even though the popularity of Asian food had grown by leaps and bounds in the past few decades. In fact, the concept of the fifth taste, umami, which roughly translates from the Japanese as ‘deliciousness,’ had not really started to be associated with other cuisines.

In a nutshell, this fairly closely describes our own relationship to umami and how this led to an unusual collaboration. A few years ago, we, Klavs and Ole, had both been invited to speak at an evening event that was part of a series of informal, university-style lectures for the general public. We had both just published books—Klavs had written about what he calls ‘grandmother’s food,’ old-fashioned Danish cuisine, and Ole had just finished a broadly based book on seaweeds, including its underexploited potential as food. As part of his talk, Klavs had prepared a tasting menu in which he had replaced the bacon in a very traditional dish with a seaweed, dulse. In the course of the presentation, he uttered the word *umami*, not exactly an expression that was common in our native Denmark and certainly not one that was associated with Danish food. Ole already knew about this mysterious fifth taste from a decades-long love affair with Japanese cuisine and, more recently, his interest in it as it related to edible seaweeds. When Ole approached Klavs afterward to ask what the term ‘umami’ meant in his universe, that of gastronomy, the idea of writing a book together was floated, and the project soon took on a life of its own.

There is something truly exciting about running up against a challenge to our preconceived notions of the world and how it is organized. These ideas have often developed gradually and imperceptibly in the course of our lives without our even being aware of their presence. But if we are suddenly confronted with a reality that does not align with our outlook, or that perhaps is much bigger and more all-encompassing than we had believed, it can lead to one of those famous ‘aha!’ moments. We start to become aware of details we had not noticed before or, possibly, knew about but had not really articulated as a concept with a distinct

name. We discovered that umami was as deeply embedded in European cuisines as in those of the East. By attaching a single word to this taste, we were immediately able to bring into focus a host of discrete sensory impressions related to it and to start to analyze them.

We approached the subject from very different perspectives. As a professional chef, Klavs sees great value in the venerable traditions of Danish food culture, while at the same time exploring ways in which it can be renewed by taking advantage of modern food science and the precepts of the New Nordic Cuisine, which emphasizes local, seasonal products of the highest quality. Ole, on the other hand, is a research scientist focusing on the discipline of biophysics, who is also an amateur chef with a great deal of curiosity about food at the molecular level and who enjoys sharing his knowledge as widely as possible. In a sense, our collaboration has had parallels with how umami works. As you will soon learn, the taste can be imparted by two different types of substances, glutamate and nucleotides, which can interact synergistically to enrich its effect beyond the contributions made by each type of substance. In relation to this book, our two distinct but complementary skill sets helped us to achieve more together than we could have simply by compiling our individual efforts.

A WORD ABOUT RECIPE MEASUREMENTS

Quantities for ingredients are given in both metric and imperial units, bearing in mind that conversion from the one to the other can only be approximate. Usually this is not an issue, as few of us prepare meals by weighing out ingredients to the nearest fraction of a gram or by using laboratory equipment to measure a liquid. We generally know what is meant by a cup and a teaspoonful, and greater accuracy is usually not needed. Many of the recipes in the book are of this type. In a few instances, where very precise, small quantities are indicated—for example, for yeast—it is important to pay close attention.

► The chef in the kitchen.

This volume is not intended to be only a cookbook, but is also meant to be a source of information that will foster a greater awareness of umami and allow readers to kick-start their own ideas about how they can take advantage of the benefits it offers. To that end, we have included a number of simple recipes and practical tips along the way. We have also included a small selection of recipes that are of a whole different level of complexity and that are intended to be inspirational and aspirational. While readers may not have the equipment or patience to try these recipes, we feel that they have a role to play by generating ‘aha!’ moments that will translate into adapting ideas from these dishes for use in everyday meals.

It is our hope that this book may serve as an eye-opener for a diverse audience—those who write about food, professional cooks, and engaged readers—and lead them to marvel at the mysteries inherent in the culinary arts and to ask a few questions about what might lie behind the small miracles of taste. Armed with some basic knowledge about how umami works and where to find it in raw ingredients, all readers should be able to use the information to unleash their creativity and invent their personal, signature umami dishes—in other words, to unlock the secrets of the fifth taste.