

## **Disgust is a necessary emotion**

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*Visitors receive a sick bag in lieu of a ticket.*

It is a hands-on, tongues-out experience. At the Museum of Disgusting Food in Malmö, in Sweden, all the world's great cuisines are represented. Each exhibit is considered a delicacy somewhere, but strikes many unaccustomed palates as revolting. Visitors are invited to handle a raw bull's penis and sip liquor with dead mice in it.

Nordic cuisine is well represented. Icelanders eat small cubes of *hakarl*, as they call it, from toothpicks. The late Anthony Bourdain, a globetrotting chef, called it "the single worst, most disgusting and terrible-tasting thing" he had ever eaten. Others have likened it to "chewing on a urine-soaked mattress".

A serious message lurks behind the grossness. Disgust is a necessary emotion. But more than any other feeling, it is culturally conditioned. Everyone experiences disgust; but what disgusts you depends in large measure on what you are used to and what the people around you deem repellent. Many East Asians, for example, find any strong cheese horrid. A Chinese tourist tasted a Danish cheese "and couldn't speak for several minutes", recalls Mr Ahrens, the museum curator.

Disgust is influenced by genes. Women are more prone to it than men, especially when pregnant and therefore endangering two lives if they eat something poisonous. It would be wrong to assume, however, that disgust is genetically programmed and therefore immutable. Val Curtis, the author of "Don't Look, Don't Touch, Don't Eat: the Science behind Revulsion", argues that it is part of the "behavioural immune system". People learn from family and friends not to eat certain things. Babies learn from their mothers' facial expressions whether a snack is considered nasty or nice. Taboos are thus passed from generation to generation.

Many people feel physically sick when contemplating something they find morally repugnant. Several exhibits in the museum might provoke this reaction: the video of farmers force-feeding geese to make their livers expand will strike many as cruel, and therefore disgusting; as will the Chinese table with a vice to hold a live monkey still while diners scoop out its brains. The conflation of disgusting and immoral extends beyond food. Most obviously, traditionalists who consider gay sex sinful often deem it repulsive, too.

Another finding is that people who are more easily disgusted are more likely to be socially conservative. (...) People who are highly sensitive to disgust are especially likely to oppose immigration. There is a logic to this. Foreigners have in the past been a source of germs to which the locals lack resistance—just ask Native Americans. But these days a vague feeling that foreigners are yucky is, to put it mildly, a less reliable guide to whether they are carrying pathogens than, say, testing them. When Donald Trump, a germophobe who uses hand sanitiser after touching others, talks of "tremendous infectious disease...pouring across the border", he is making an emotionally powerful case for immigration restrictions, but not a rational one.

When people recognise that disgust depends in part on upbringing, they can learn to overcome it, at least some of the time. They can open themselves to new experiences. And maybe, just maybe, they might learn to be more tolerant of people from unfamiliar cultures.

In this spirit, your correspondent approached the museum's tasting bar. Thirteen disgusting foods were laid out for sampling. He tried them all and liked more than half, especially the fermented mini-shrimps and the sauerkraut juice. Only one food made him choke: Icelandic "devil" salted liquorice. The sensation was awful and overwhelming. Your correspondent took a bag home for his children. They have not yet forgiven him.

