

**CSABA MÉSZÁROS**

## THE TASTE OF FAT

### NOURISHING MORE THAN JUST THE BODY IN YAKUTIA

#### ABSTRACT

This paper relies on ethnographic research carried out in subarctic Yakutia in northeastern Siberia in order to explore why certain tastes are perceived differently in various communities. The proposed phenomenological approach highlights the importance of the material quality of fat as it is perceived in three Sakha village communities in Yakutia (Sakha Republic). This perception is rooted in ontological foundations that are significant not only in food culture but also in the broader context of Sakha adaptation in Northeastern Siberia, in the subarctic environment.

Anthropological<sup>1</sup> field notes and ethnographic vignettes often oscillate around the experience of eating, drinking, and common repasts in the field.<sup>2</sup> Sensing during fieldwork is not strictly limited to seeing (taking photos/creating images/making films) and hearing (recording sounds, music, and verbal representations) but also relies on tasting, smelling and somatic experiences.<sup>3</sup> These experiences do not usually lend themselves easily to anthropological theorisation and to a conceptual grasp. Writing about tastes, smells, and odours can be easily discredited in anthropological scholarship as non-theoretical and ethnography-bound sheer

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1 Reference to this study: Csaba Mészáros: The Taste of Fat. Nourishing More than just the Body in Yakutia. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 297–309.

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2 Haines, Helen R.: 'A Rat by Any Other Name: Conflicting Definitions of "Dinner" in Belize, Central America', in Haines, Helen R. and Sammells, Clare A. eds.: *Adventures in Eating: Anthropological Experiences in Dining from Around the World* (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 43–58.

3 Laplante, Julie – Scobie, Willow and Gandsman, Ari: 'Introduction: Lines of Flight', in Laplante, Julie – Scobie, Willow and Gandsman, Ari eds.: *Search After Method: Sensing, Moving, and Imagining in Anthropological Fieldwork* (London: Berghahn Books, 2020), 1–18.

representations of memories and sensory experiences – in short, anecdotal sketches from the merry times of fieldwork.<sup>4</sup>

Capitalising on some of my fieldwork experiences from Yakutia in northeastern Siberia, I will argue in this article, that by immersing oneself in tastes and flavours, and by examining materials with properties stimulating the gustatory system, ethnographic descriptions of local communities are made more accurate and truer to the realities encountered in the field, including sitting at dinner tables, and that this approach ultimately enhances the quality of ethnographic accounts. That is, writing about tastes, tasting, and experiences of eating together with local community members adds to the integrity of anthropological representation. Thus, the evocations of joint events and common repasts are much more than just ethnographic vignettes from the field; they contribute to a better understanding and conceptualisation of the local lifeworlds of Sakha village communities.

Anthropology has relied heavily on the fieldworker's eyes and ears.<sup>5</sup> Analysing texts and verbalised knowledge alongside observable practices and skills, has provided a detailed description of lifeworlds in anthropological writing. However, alterity presents itself not only in local practices, narrative constructions, knowledge, skills, and so on (as represented in field notes, recorded images, and sounds), but also in more volatile experiences, like in the taste and smell of food.<sup>6</sup> While anthropologists do collect and record their experiences of being disgusted or delighted by a drink or a food during fieldwork, they can hardly (if at all) conceptualise these observations verbatim in their scholarly output.<sup>7</sup> It is, of course, possible to vividly describe these experiences, but it is a challenge to translate them into academic abstractions.

At the same time, differences in taste or feelings of disgust towards certain foods (or materials) are clear indicators of anthropologists encountering radical alterity. The reluctance to taste (and enjoy) specific foods highlights the limitations of fully immersing oneself in local lifeworlds.

In this paper, I will discuss my experiences with eating fat in Yakutia and its significance within Sakha communities. This study explores how fat is perceived,

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4 Stoller, Paul: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things. The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

5 Okely, Judith: *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020).

6 Sutton, David E.: 'Food and the senses', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010), 209–223.

7 Durham, Deborah: 'Disgust and the Anthropological Imagination', *Ethnos* 76/2 (2011), 131–156.

emphasising its connections to life and sustainable farming for the Sakha people of Siberia. While food research in anthropology typically focuses on production and branding, I aim to broaden this perspective by including the relationships between various living beings and materials.

I will first address the challenges of food perception in anthropology, then introduce a phenomenological approach that allows the researcher's culturally-influenced perceptions to be set aside. This is crucial because taste is subjective; what one may find unappetising could still be considered delicious within a particular cultural context. It is important to recognise that the perception of fat and fatty foods is shaped by context, as no entity is encountered in isolation but rather within specific circumstances.

Next, I would like to explore the role of fat as a substance in the lifeworld of the Siberian Sakha people. Specifically, I aim to understand the material characteristics of fat, as well as how the locals perceive its colour, texture, taste, and nutritional value. Furthermore, I will develop my argument to emphasise the ontological significance of the material qualities of fat. My goal is to tackle the key issue – that the relationship between food and humans cannot be separated from the local lifeworld. In order to gain an understanding of this relationship, the connections between various living and non-living entities in the subarctic landscape requires examination.

#### TASTING FAT WITH FELLOW TABLEMATES

Before I examine the issues arising from the different perceptions of flavours – specifically the taste of various foods along with their associated smells, textures, and appearances – it is important to recount a few fieldwork experiences that highlighted a significant divide between my Sakha friends and me, in our interpretation of the enjoyment derived from a particular food. The first experience revolves around a soup made from the large sea duck called the velvet scoter, which we shared with my friend. The Sakha consider these birds to be exceptionally delicious, largely due to their high-fat content, which, for them, contributes to their unique enjoyment value. The way the Sakha people consume soup made from a fat and plump bird, differs from the practice with other game soups. As the velvet scoter simmers, a layer of fat rises to the top, which is ladled off into a separate bowl. When served, the soup is drunk from a mug, while the meat is dipped in the

fat in the bowl before it is eaten. Although I found the dish less appealing with the fat, Ystapaan insisted that the fat held the bird's flavour, and I obliged by dipping the meat in the fat out of courtesy.

A similar experience occurred with Sakha beef-tripe soup during my fieldwork in Tanda in 2002. Initially put off by its fat content, I eventually grew to appreciate the soup after a few months. Moving on to crucian carp soup, its enjoyment also hinges on its rich fat content, especially when made from fish caught in early winter. Smaller, fatter crucian carps which produce a juicier broth, are preferred. Sakha locals drink the broth separately from the carp flesh, often stating that consuming the broth at night ensures restful sleep. Good, fatty soups are particularly important for men, because, according to the locals, 'A man without soup is like a stallion without his balls.' My focus will now be on the theme of fat in order to capture the Sakha people's way of life through their taste perceptions.

I began to wonder what makes fat taste special to Sakhas but not to me. One local explanation is that men view fatty foods as essential fuel, similar to gasoline for SUVs, providing the energy needed for hard work and outdoor activities. Additionally, fat plays a crucial role in enhancing flavour; it contains concentrated flavours that contribute to the overall taste of food without the need for extra seasoning.

The question is: What makes fat taste special for the Sakhas? And further: What unique experiences and meanings do they associate with it? Tasting involves distinguishing and articulating flavours.<sup>8</sup> It is not just that fat tastes different; it is the overall experience that sets my tablemates apart from me,<sup>9</sup> because my concern is to understand how and why *their* perception of fat differs from mine.<sup>10</sup> It may seem evident that fat may taste similar to everyone (in fact, it is the same material), but we have different kinds of experiences when eating fatty meat. Therefore, it should be recognised that those Sakha, with memories, everyday sensory experience, and knowledge about fat as a material, have different experiences than those who do not (such as some foreign anthropologists, like me, in Yakutia).

8 Borthwick, Fiona: 'Olfaction and Taste: Invasive Odours and Disappearing Objects', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11 (2000), 127–140.

9 Pallies, Daniel: 'How Do We Differ When We Differ In Taste?', *Ergo. An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 8 (2022).

10 Cf. Hok-Eng Tan, Fransisca: 'Flavours of Thought: Towards a Phenomenology of Food-related Experiences', *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 11/4 (2013), 400–414.

In the following discourse, I will employ a phenomenological approach in order to explore the fundamental difference between the taste of fat as a purely sensory experience and the overall experience of eating and perceiving fat. To facilitate the application of phenomenological considerations of taste perception to the taste perception of fat among the Sakha, I propose to narrow down the numerous phenomenological approaches to the fundamental concept – that humans do not perceive in general, but always perceive a specific thing and in a specific way.

#### PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE PERCEPTION OF TASTE

Phenomenological approaches in anthropology are concerned with the study of the differences in how people perceive and experience their lifeworlds. These perceptions and experiences may differ vastly, based on different personal and cultural backgrounds, memories, and previous experiences. One perceives other entities ‘as’ something. As Michael Schnegg puts it:

In brief, the ‘as’ is what phenomenology is about. When analysing this as-structure, phenomenologists typically claim that there is no dichotomy between sensorial perception and categorical thought, but that perceptual experience itself is already cognitive (in that the knowledge we have about, say, water influences the ways we ‘see’ it).<sup>11</sup>

Many contexts shape the lifeworld in which one experiences fat and fatty meat/dishes in this or that way. These contexts may vary from bodily and sensory determinations to knowledge, memories, and history.<sup>12</sup> In other words, a phenomenologically-oriented investigation must consider both external and internal, as well as bodily and mental, factors that influence perception and experience. In the case of fat, Brad Weiss gives a splendid example of how the perception of fat depends on various factors. He states that when ‘considering the taste of pork fat and fatty pork, I argue that the taste of such fat is critical to understanding different registers of value that are available when eating pork.’<sup>13</sup>

11 Schnegg, Michael: ‘Phenomenological Anthropology: Philosophical Concepts for Ethnographic Use’, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 148 (2024), 60.

12 Gallagher, Shaun and Zahavi, Dan: *The Phenomenological Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

13 Weiss, Brad: ‘In Tastes, Lost and Found: Remembering the Real Flavor of Fat Pork’, in Forth, Christopher E. and Leitch, Alison eds.: *Fat: Culture and Materiality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 34–35.

The factors influencing perception cannot be reduced to a simple subject-object relationship between the perceiver and the food. Both the individual and the food are deeply embedded in their environment, or lifeworld, which affects how perceptions and experiences are formed. This interdependence highlights that perception is integral to the lifeworld itself, with recurrent experiences shaping local contexts. Thus, a continuous interplay exists, in which perceptions, experiences, and elements within the shared lifeworld, influence one another.

As a result, focusing on first-person experiences in contrast to examining (food) 'culture' and systems of representations, does not mean that the research outcome is detached from the context, the lifeworld – rather, it means that the researcher should put the basic categories of his/her perception into brackets when learning about local lifeworlds. The sensory element, in that way, is not just an internal capacity; it is also manifested in the autonomous characteristics of things, which can then invade the body as perceptual experience.<sup>14</sup>

The structure of our lifeworlds and the uniqueness of human perception are intertwined with the entities in our environment. It is important to consider the properties of the substances that comprise living and inanimate entities. These properties are not merely passive; they actively shape our systems of representation and cultural structures. The reciprocity between these substances and our interactions with them influences the formation of our lifeworlds, with both individual entities and repeated perceptions playing a vital role in this process.

When considering perception, it is more insightful to focus on how specific entities, along with their material qualities, contribute to the process of perception rather than viewing them solely as signs or elements of cultural representations.<sup>15</sup> The question is, how materials are embedded in the local lifeworlds. Materials are not whiteboards waiting for the human agent to mark them with cultural signs of the gustatory code; they actively participate and play a significant role in shaping human perception. Describing the way local people perceive and interact with entities made up of various materials, contributes to a better understanding of local communities.

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14 Seremetakis, Nadia C.: 'The Memory of the Senses. Part 1: Marks of the Transitory', in Seremetakis, Nadia C., ed.: *The Senses Still. Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2017), 6.

15 Lévi-Strauss, Claude: *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

One fundamental question in phenomenology concerns the roles of the sensing subject versus the sensed entity. Does the human mind (or rather the body)<sup>16</sup> actively seek to understand external entities, or do these entities present the question: 'What am I to you?'<sup>17</sup> I argue that these perspectives are less relevant from an anthropological standpoint. The researcher's focus should be on how locals perceive their lifeworld rather than dismissing the significance of materials or the perspectives of those perceiving them. In the next section, I will examine the nature of fat as understood by the Sakha people.

#### WHAT IS FAT IN SUBARCTIC YAKUTIA?

In his insightful article, Tim Ingold argues that materials are not static objects but come into being through interactions in their environment. Humans are not merely observers; we are deeply embedded in a dynamic 'ocean of materials.' This environment undergoes processes like mixing, separating, solidifying, and evaporating. Ingold emphasises that fundamental elements are active mediums facilitating interactions and transformations within this complex tapestry, highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and their material surroundings.<sup>18</sup> In one of his concluding remarks, he asserts, as follows:

Thus the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. In that sense, every property is a condensed story. To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix, and mutate.<sup>19</sup>

In line with these ideas, I shall try to compile, in the following pages, the anthropologist's experiences – my ethnographic vignettes (rather than records) – on the properties of fat, and how fat is perceived, tasted, and assessed by my Sakha tablemates.

*Size of fat:* In general, the more fat there is in meat the better it is considered for any meal. In fatty cuts, like horse flank, for example, the width of the fat layer is observed

16 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2010).

17 Waldenfels, Bernhard: *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

18 Ingold, Tim: 'Materials against materiality' *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (2007), 1–16.

19 Ingold: 'Materials against materiality', 14.

and commented on by the consumers. For Sakhas, lean meat (referred to as *kötökh et*) is considered inferior. Conversely, fatty meat (known as *emis et*) is seen as desirable and associated with high enjoyment value.

*Colour of fat:* Natural colour can significantly enhance the enjoyment of fat. The slightly yellowish fat of velvet scoters, for example, adds to the overall experience of consuming them. Similarly, in the case of foal fat, a more vibrant colour – ranging up to orange – is often perceived as having a higher enjoyment value.

*Smell of fat:* Most fats should enhance a food's scent without being strong or odourless. A dry, featureless fat, or one with a strong acidic smell, is undesirable.

*Texture of fat:* Texture is less important for good fats. Since fats can be consumed in frozen, raw, and melted forms, good fats may have different textures.

*Taste of fat:* Fat can have diverse flavours, varying by animal. For instance, the fat from beef differs from that of horses. Importantly, all fats carry the specific flavours of the animal from which it came, thus amplifying and conveying them to the consumer.

In summary, fat quality varies depending on its source, as each type of animal fat has its own distinct characteristics, including both colour and texture. However, the common feature of all these fats is their ability to enhance the flavour of food, intensifying the specific tastes associated with the region,<sup>20</sup> and the animal from which they have come.

## THE ANIMATE PERMAFROST LANDSCAPE

The village communities I visited in Yakutia engage in agricultural activities such as cattle and horse breeding, haymaking, and fishing – all closely tied to the affordances of the permafrost landscape. A unique feature of this environment is the thermokarst depressions known as *alaas* in Sakha. In the Central Yakutian lowlands, *alaas* meadows form a patchwork within the boreal forest, the *taiga*. The Sakha people see *alaas* meadows, not as mere natural formations, but as the result of their own

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Trubek, Amy B.: *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

presence in the area.<sup>21</sup> These meadows are vital for their economy, serving functions such as growing hay for harvesting, providing grazing and water, as well as supporting fishing and hunting activities. However, *alaas* meadows are also referred to as living entities with names, distinct character traits, a sense of identity, and deserving of the same respect as humans or animals.

Cognitive maps created by the Sakha people reflect this view, portraying the environment as an interconnected web of live entities rather than a simple navigational grid. These maps emphasise the socio-natural relationships that shape their understanding of the landscape. The ‘space’ for social actions, termed society, consists of discrete entities like individuals, while Sakha mental maps resemble sociograms that enumerate living beings. Their concept of local society, encompassing both human and non-human entities, emphasises a complementary relationship between body and soul. The Sakha believe that three interrelated souls – mother soul (*ije kut*), earth soul (*buor kut*), and air soul (*salgyn kut*) – construct the world.<sup>22</sup> Humans possess all three souls, while other beings usually have fewer.

The eternal mother soul enriches and develops with each life, giving rise to the earth soul at conception, which remains inseparable from the body and transforms into soil upon death. *Alaas* meadows serve as a medium for relationships among animals, humans, and plants. Animals raised there are often slaughtered in the same location, imbuing the land and water with their souls. This transformation creates a breeding ground for new life. Sakha herdsman and fishermen can distinguish between soil types that affect water quality and plant growth, as the taste of the soil and water is reflected in the organisms that inhabit it, which the Sakha seek for good food.

#### NOURISHING MORE THAN JUST THE BODY

Therefore, Sakha culinary preference is for food that is raw, without spices. The most characteristic flavour of a particular area is accumulated in the internal organs and the fat of animals. The meat and the liver, eaten raw, are full of vitamins (*sümehin*), which are transferred to you only if you do not cook or roast the meat.

21 Crate, Susan – Ulrich, Mathias – Habeck, J. Otto – Desyatkin, Aleksey R. – Desyatkin, Roman V. – Fedorov, Aleksander N. – Hiyama, Tetsuya – Iijima, Yoshihiro – Ksenofontov, Stanislav – Mészáros, Csaba and Takakura, Hiroki: ‘Permafrost livelihoods: A transdisciplinary review and analysis of thermokarst-based systems of indigenous land use’, *Anthropocene* 18 (2017), 89–104.

22 Tumusov, Fedot C.: *Yal bii biliite* (‘Basic knowledge on the family’) (D’okuuksaj: Kuduk, 2001).

This unique taste can also be found in fatty crucian carps, caught in *alaas* lakes. These fish live in the lakes of the *alaas* as one of the very few species of fish existing there. To the Sakha, a carp is almost like a horse or a cow: it is a living creature of the *alaas* – and not of the rivers and the boreal forest. It carries a flavour that is peculiar to the land and the water (that is, the body) of the *alaas*. Nothing is in that fish that is not part of the *alaas*. It eats the plants and insects of the *alaas* pond. Unlike other fishes, whose offal is removed during cleaning, all of the offal (except the gallbladder) remains inside the carp. The way it is killed and prepared is very similar to the way the horse is slaughtered; in fact, the Sakha use the same phrase (*üös tardar*) for opening up the body of both the crucian carp and horse.<sup>23</sup>

Having participated in many eating activities and repasts, I realised that certain local foods provide nutritional value, and that some add further intangible nourishment that feeds more than just the body. Dairy food and fatty meat are the two major sources of full-blown nourishment.

Dairy foods, particularly those with a high fat content, hold great importance in Sakha food culture.<sup>24</sup> Fatty dairy products have two respectful designations: *sölögöj*, which signifies a blessed, independently-existing substance, and *tunakh*, which refers to the product of human effort. While *sölögöj* is given to humans, *tunakh* is offered to non-humans, facilitating a two-way communication process with various entities, including lakes and spirits.<sup>25</sup>

Fat from slaughtered cattle and horses is highly valued and often used as a substitute for butter. Traditionally, families compared the amount of fat collected after the slaughter of livestock, to gauge blessings. The inner fat, known as *khaha*, is particularly prized for enhancing the nutritional value of foods.<sup>26</sup> Fatter animals are deemed to be of a higher quality than the leaner variety, as their meat is considered

23 Maj, Emilie: 'Croyances et convenances iakoutes autour du sobo. Ethnographie du poisson où tout est bon ('Sakha beliefs and customs around sobo. Ethnography of fish, which is all over good'), *L'Homme* 177–178 (2006), 303–327.

24 Gorokhov, N. I.: *Uluchshenie molochnogo skota v uslovijah Respubliki Saha (Jakutija)*, ('The improvement of dairy cows in the environment of the Sakha Republic') (Novosibirsk: Sibirskoe otdelenie RASKhN, 2001).

25 Kolodeznikov, Sergej, K. Konstantinovich: 'Probleme tradicionnogo mirovozzrenija jakutov ('On the problems of Sakha worldview'), in *Jazyk, mifi kul'tura narodov Sibirii* (Yakutsk: Bichik, 1994), 217–226.

26 Nikolaev, Semen Ivanovich (Somogotto) *Pishcha jakutov (v svete sosednikh kul'tur)* ('Sakha food culture, from the perspective of neighbouring cultures') (Jakutsk: Jakutskij kraj, 2010).

to be more nutritious and easier to digest. Additionally, fat and butter are believed to enhance fertility, making them significant during childbirth and ritual events.

## FAT AND THE LIVE LANDSCAPE

The soil of the *alaas* meadow profoundly influences rural Sakha cuisine, where the absence of spices and reliance on raw meat, blood, and fat, connect people directly to this substance. The act of slaughtering animals symbolises a reclamation of the shared resources of nature and community, emphasising the continuity of life. The Sakha's traditional system represents a deeply moral circular economy, where the role of humans is to facilitate the flow of life substances. However, Russian and Soviet policies have disrupted this balance, leading to the extinction of some species and the introduction of others – alongside the altering of the ecosystem due to climate change. Despite the pressure from the state, this circular economy has persisted for almost four centuries, but now the Sakha people face the challenge of permafrost humidification. In the Anthropocene, while human activity is dominant, local Sakhas feel increasingly disconnected from their environment; they breed fewer and fewer cattle and horses, and, in particular, the lakes and meadows that once were perceived as living entities, now seemingly do not want to communicate with humans anymore.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mészáros, Csaba: 'The circulation of fat: Sustainability and morality in subarctic Sakha horse and cattle economy,' *Tabula* 24/2 (2023); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54742/tabula.2023.2.0>.

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