

Taste and see: Savory meat

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

In 2008, we have the opportunity to celebrate the centennial of MSG! In 1908, Japanese scientist Kikunae Ikeda isolated MSG—monosodium glutamate—and introduced the concept of a fifth taste: *umami*. I personally hadn't heard of it until this past autumn and had been getting along just fine with salty, sour, sweet and bitter. Now suddenly my sense of contentment has been disturbed by the discovery of umami.

This taste sense is hardly new. The ancient Chinese had a symbol for it, the Japanese named it, and in English the idea comes close to "savory." Ikeda's contribution was working with seaweed broth to produce MSG, which makes meat taste, well, more like meat.

Pondering the idea of umami, I thought of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 27. There we learn that the patriarch asked for "savory meat," which he emphatically loved. He asked favored son Esau to kill for it. At the same time, Esau's brother, Jacob, and his mother, Rebekah, tricked Isaac, who was by then dim of both eye and wit. Jacob came away with the blessing intended for his brother, the greatest boon in the history of sibling rivalry.

Millennia later, Isaac's obsession remains. Chefs, food producers, recipe writers and restaurateurs can't press ahead fast enough with umami-enhanced foods, most of which taste much better than seaweed: wines, ketchup, soy sauce and parmesan cheese.

When high on umami, I find myself transposing the concept to other senses. Doesn't umami apply visually, for example, to colors that come alive?

Recently a friend told me that she had felt cheated when, in the kindergarten scramble for Crayolas, she got short-changed and had to settle for tan. That reminded me of the color my mother used to dye worn curtains. When we kids went along to shop for dye, we saw alluring greens and purples and reds for sale, but she would order ecru, the most visually unsavory hue I can think of.

H. G. Wells had heard how Immanuel Kant and Blaise Pascal were dazzled and stunned by the starry heavens, but he confessed that the modern experience of disenchantment had left him with a visually un-umami experience: when he looked at the heavens, stars meant no more to him than the faded wallpaper in a suburban railway station. His eyes needed a dose of visual MSG.

Consider then the spiritual dimensions of umami. Think of the times when you were a visitor to a church where the preacher was as uncharismatic as ecru, or so unimaginative that the presence of the Holy One was diminished to tan. And instead of the divine elemental roar of the organ or the enticements of the flute, a desperate and weary song leader pleads: “Now, sing it once more, but this time with feeling!” Too little and too late.

An old Hasidic teaching warns that we will be punished in the life to come for every taste we have neglected in this one. Let’s enjoy the prospect of paradise while meeting the challenge at the earthly table, the humble hamburger whose enlivener is ketchup or the gourmet restaurant that offers “umami bombs,” for a high dose of MSG.

Isaac in his dotage is an unlikely icon for our times. Yet we remember that in one late umami-inspired moment, he roused himself to confess his passion. He ordered his son, “Make me savory meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat.” An umami bomb perhaps, almost literally, “to die for.” And now we all get the blessing.