A Toast to Champagne… and Other Sounds, Sights, and Textures

*Two OLLI food and wine connoisseurs explore how sights, sounds, and textures play a major role in flavor perception, sometimes even more than taste and aroma.*

**A POLAND:**  Do you listen to your food? Ever give it a big hug? Just stare at it? On this show two OLLI food and drink connoisseurs explore the senses of sound, sight, and touch and how they affect the taste. For instance, these two experts just don't drink champagne, they see, they feel and most importantly they listen to it.

(CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE OPENED)

(CHAMPAGNE BEING POURED)

(CHAMPAGNE FIZZING)

**S SHEPARD:** For me, that pop is, you know everybody loves the champagne cork pop!

**S RICHCREEK:** I don't do the pop as much. When you go through restaurant service training they will try to avoid popping it. It should sound like a nun sighing.

(LAUGHTER)

**S RICHCREEK:** Nun sighing, I am starting to think of something different.

(LAUGHTER)

**A POLAND:** We are about to whet your appetite. Total Wine executive, Shawn Richcreek and food consultant, Shawn Shepard toast champagne and other sounds, shapes, and textures.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**A POLAND:** Welcome to *In Conversation: The Voices of OLLI*. OLLI, O-L-L-I is an acronym for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute located and networked with the Palm Desert Campus of California State University San Bernardino.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ENDS)

**A POLAND:** Dining and drinking are multisensory experiences. Sound sight and touch may play a key role in your enjoyment of food and beverage as taste and smell. In their conversation, OLLI instructor, Shawn Richcreek, has just learned that his student, miss Shawn Shepard has accepted a new important position in the food industry. To celebrate she recently hosted a party with champagne and horderves’ curated to entice and feed all the senses.

(DING SOUND)

**S SHEPARD:** I am really delighted to be moving to a new professional opportunity and we toasted with champagne and it is every part of that process of that toast is part of the joy of the new experience which is part of why I love champagne for. I think it actually starts with the aesthetic beauty of a champagne bottle. Actually, like I resonate they’re often more dramatic looking, right? Even at the top of it but there is something about a softer shape because of the round bulbous bottom and it just has so much going visual. For me that pop, you know everybody loves that champagne cork pop. That is a fun sound.

**S RICHCREEK:** I think for me, it starts with the visual appeal of the bottle. They do look so much different than everything else on the shelf. One of the ways that they look different is that they tend to have heavier labels. The weight of the paper on the labels. There is a definite different tactile difference to the bottle of champagne. The other thing is the foil capsule that goes over the top of the bottle of most sparkling wine, tends to be longer and goes it goes a little bit further down the neck of the bottle and it requires just a little bit more effort to get it off than to get that to get it off a typical wine capsule off... Do you ever cut the foil from the bottle of Dom Perignon it is not super easy… you can’t just get out your foil cutter like you would for your chardonnay and get that foil capsule off. You kind of have to get the knife and make a good carve and get that off. Then there is the opening of it, right? Everybody knows not to shake a bottle of champagne or you lose all the fizz. The other reason is that there is a safety issue in play there, right? So, for me, opening that bottle is untwisting the metal cage at the top of the bottle. I know from doing it hundreds of times, it is the sixth twist before the metal cage is loose. Once you get to that sixth twist you are supposed to hold the part that sticks out between your two fingers. At this point, the liquid is ready to be unleashed and so you want to be careful. Because I am a big giant nerd I don’t do the pop as much. In fact, when you go through restaurant service training they will teach you. In fact, when you go through restaurant service training they will try to avoid popping it. If you can avoid popping it, it should sound like a nun sighing.

**S RICHCREEK:** I’m like what? I never spend a lot of time with nuns.

(LAUGH)

**S RICHCREEK:** Nun sighing, I am starting to think of something different.

(LAUGHTER)

**S RICHCREEK:** And so, for me, there is a little bit more care and caution put into opening a bottle of sparkling wine and that heightens that experience of the enjoyment right because you had to work a little harder and you had to be a little more careful and you had to protect that essence from spilling out. So, when you finally get to pour it in your glass it already has so much damn pompous circumstance. I am literally salivating just thinking of that.

**S SHEPARD:** When I look at champagne it has these bubbles. It’s so funny but immediately I think of theater lighting. It is very theatrical because all of these little bubbles are light and they’re a source of brightness. To me, it always looks like I’m… One of my favorite visuals as a person is being somewhere above the city looking down at all the lights. I just think that is beautiful and to me, that is what champagne looks like in the glass.  it has a little million points of light in that glass.

**S RICHCREEK:** The visuality of a glass… just call it a glass of real French champagne. There is something about it but maybe I am getting a little wonky about it here but there is something about it that is mysterious and it commands your attention. You are not looking at just the static, like you look at a glass of wine, it is pretty much static. You can swirl it around but there is not much going on. As you look down into a wine glass or champagne flu, there are literally millions of little bubbles of CO2 that are flying out with all of full force to get out of that glass and go god knows where. All of that is happening simultaneously with whatever light is available refracting off of the sides of the stemware and there is a lot going on visually when you look at champagne. It has gas and has is effortless and vigorous of the bubble. There is a textural thing beyond the CO2 because it comes from such a cold place. It is frankly—if you were to have the baseline before it went through the second fermentation and gained the extra complexities most people wouldn’t like the base wine all that much. They tend to be very high in acid. So that really brisk acidity comes through in the finished process. It is this awesome kind of just position of these two completely different textures. You have the really velvety texture of the light beat of the CO2 and then you have this strict laser beam acidity and both of these things happen simultaneously. It really demands your attention. That is one thing about champagne. It is not just the ritual, once you take a sip of it, it demands your attention because you have so many different things happening. For me the mouth feel demands attention.

**S SHEPARD:** I actually agree with that. One of the things I know is everyone loves a mimosa but the truth is I feel like a mimosa takes the experience away from champagne. I would rather have the joy of champagne with a beautiful strawberry drop dip to it, you know? Just those kinds of treats that give it the extra without having to throw a whole lot of orange juice on top of it. Part of the reason I feel that I respond to champagne in that way and don't want it in those other forms is because I love… First of all, you have to serve it really cold. I love the refreshing quality of the cold and the acidity, having you talk about that Shawn it makes sense because I like that it makes it crisp like I just bit into a granny smith apple and it has that

(DELIGHTED NOISES)

**S SHEPARD:**  It has a big mouth flavor that wakes me up. It is a delight and it resonates for me the celebratory memories… and I love that. I have had some great champagne. I have had some cheaper champagne and frankly it doesn't matter the price but what the thought is, it matters how it pays. I have loved all of it. I love that it is a celebration thing but I also love… sometimes we would have a bottle of champagne with crackers and cheese and a little meat just out on the patio and that is dinner. Champagne and snacks. I’ve had champagne and popcorn and thought it was one of the best nights ever.

(LAUGHS)

**S RICHCREEK:** That is a good night.

(LAUGHTER CONTINUES)

**S SHEPARD:** To me a creamy textured whatever. So, let's say a great homemade macaroni and cheese right. Dripping with cheeses, with a cream base, and not skim milk, you know. Go all in, butter, real pasta, you know all those good things and it’s even good. It’s really good but it would be even better if it had the panko crumbs on top and so you have both things going on. I think about how we mix texture when we are cooking because I made mommy mommy last night and it had a crunchy garlic top to it.

(GASP)

**S SHEPARD:** it was just great. You know one of the things that I respond to a lot in food and wine is texture. So, to me if I look at a plate I want to see variants of texture, I want to see variants of color, I have a hard time with monochromatic meals. I don’t want those on my plate. I want to see things be different but that crunch of a salty cracker with soft cheese on it and follow it with that big push of the champagne bubbles. Having all that wonderful contrast that you like having in a food experience. So, I love a good crunchy cracker topping it with lovely cheese and so having all of it in a mix is important to me and I think a lot of people.

**S RICHCREEK:** My family teases me and tells me I am the inventor of the whole plate sandwich because I would take a roll and I would try to get as many different parts of the meal. There would be turkey, gravy, stuffing, potatoes onto that sandwich. What I loved about the sandwich is not necessarily all the flavors but all the different textures.

**S SHEPARD:** Temperature is absolutely part of the tactile sensory experience of food and incredibly I think I have always been where the temperature is important because Temperature affects the creaminess level, the \_\_\_ of something. Everything, all of the texture of the food is affected by what temperature it is. So, that is why when you want to have a good cheese plate you don't put it two minutes before the guests arrive you put the cheese on the plate an hour, or hour in a half before they arrive to let it get to room temperature. When it comes time to put the apples and grapes you put it out at the end because you want it to be cold and crisp but you want that cheese to be at room temperature and you want it to have more environment opened up just the same way wine does, cheese opens up. The texture is so important and temperature is related. A couple of years ago there was a movement about fast freezing things. We would go to events and there would be fast-frozen cereal as a dessert item, right? It would be Froot Loops that were micro frozen. You get a little cup of Froot Loops they were steaming with the nitro steam off of them but when you taste a Froot Frito, a micro frozen Froot Loop it has more flavor more intensity, and more of everything because it is hyper cold. It is waking everything up in your tongue because it tastes all of this because it is right here right now. It will change in half a second because the temperature will be different. I love that temperature is a part of the food. People talk about if there is diversity in your palette experience, you enjoy all of it better.

**A POLAND:** The conversation then turned from the topic of textures to the role of sound in the kitchen.

**S RICHCREEK:** There is a person who was really influential to me about ten years ago and his name is Hobey Webler. He is a UC Davis trained chemist and he has worked for a long time in the blind business. He has been blind since birth. His contribution is reminding us to take advantage of the rest of our senses. He does this sensory tasting deprivation class that really forces you. You put on blindfolds for an hour. I don’t know if most of us have ever been blindfolded in our lives, we haven’t been blindfolded for an hour. You do things, you basically walk through the vineyards blindfolded and spend a good hour lying in his world and really forcing you to pay attention to your other senses. So for me, sound now is actually something I pay a lot more attention.

**N SMABY:** Ultimately sound is really important in the kitchen and cooking for me and part of it is my experience as a child. I had this grandmother who was this amazing cook and she would do all these things but you would end up having four or five things going at one time. The fried chicken is going, the mashed potatoes are going and all those.

(SMALL LAUGH)

**N SMABY:** Very early in my life, I used to hear her say, “The chicken is done. I hear it, it’s done.” I think how is it possible that the chicken is making a sound? I would go over to the frying pan and see that it is crispy and brown and you this was the good old-school fried chicken by the way, like a classic. She could hear it in the sound and I know when you are starting to fry something, starting to make candy, or all those things and throw a little water in, you listen for the sizzle. You don’t watch it, you are listening for it to do exactly what it’s supposed to do.

(LAUGHS)

**N SMABY:** So, I really resonate with sound in the kitchen.

**S RICHCREEK:** One of my favorite sounds, one of my favorite things in the world is I’m a freshly brown pepper dude. There is almost nothing I don’t put pepper on and I am a snob. I can't just take pepper out of a pepper shaft, I have got to grind it. I actually make it a point to go to cost-plus a couple times a year because you can buy peppercorn mixes there that you can’t get anywhere else. I got, not kidding you, three pepper grinders in the kitchen right now. I have a different mix of peppercorn in them. So, for me, one of the sounds that get me the hungriest is when I start to grind the pepper. Each one of my pepper grinders because mechanically different and the peppercorns are different because they have different hardnesses to them. They all make a slightly different sound and that sound gets me thinking about what it’s going to taste like. There is one mix that I like to use on vegetables and it has some white, red, and green peppercorns and I associate that with fresh things like cucumbers and salads and vegetables. Another one is your standard peppercorn mix which is for an all-purpose mix but then I have one really expensive Malabar Peppers and the only time I really use them is on a steak.

**S SHEPARD:** Steak.

(LAUGHS)

**S RICHCREEK:** So, I really start thinking in terms of not just steak but mushrooms, red wine reduction, and stuff and the sounds of those things are the first, really the first sensory prompts that get my brain headed in that direction.

**A POLAND:** Charles Spence of Oxford University in England has revolutionized the field of taste and how flavor is perceived by your ears and eyes as well as touch receptors. He likes to call it gastrophysics. In seminal tests, Dr. Spence asked his students to take a bite of dark chocolate and listen to two soundscapes. One was pitched high and the other low. Amazingly the higher pitch created a sweeter of taste and the low pitch a more bitter one. We recreated the taste for Miss Shepard and Mister Richcreek. They each took a bite of dark chocolate… ahh yum yum. As we played a high and low tone. Will the taste of the same chocolate change?

(HIGH TONE PLAYS)

**A POLAND:** Listen in.

(HIGH TONE STOPS)

**A POLAND:** That was the high tone. Now listen, not only to the low base tone but to their reaction to how these tones affected their taste buds.

(LOW TONE PLAYS)

**S SHEPARD:** Hm.

(FAINT LAUGH)

**S SHEPARD:** Hm.

(LOW TONE STOPS)

**A POLAND:** So how did the dark chocolate taste on the high treble tone?

**S SHEPARD:** Sweet and light.

**S RICHCREEK:** Yeah, I agree Shawn. It tasted sweeter on the first tone.

**A POLAND:** Same chocolate but more bitter on the lower base notes.

**S SHEPARD:** That is a cool— That is a cool illustration. It’s immediate.

( SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**A POLAND:** Same bite of chocolate.

**S SHEPARD:** Oh.

**S RICHCREEK:** Wow.

(LAUGHTER)

**A POLAND:** So, listen to your food and your drink.

(FAINT LAUGH)

**A POLAND:** Also, while you’re at it listen to our OLLIcasts available on apple, google, audible, and bunches of other podcast platforms.

(LOUDER SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**A POLAND:** Our thanks to Cal State San Bernardino in Palm Desert. Along with the communications study professor, Lacey Kendall, and her media students. This podcast was produced for OLLI by Lou Gorfain and I am Dr. Arlette Poland.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ENDS)