EDIBLE SEDUCTION

The new science of craving reveals a link between lust and hunger—and explains why the path to a woman's bedroom runs right through her kitchen.

By Matt Bean
Photographs by George Holz
"When I have a craving for something, I just can’t hold myself back."

Andrews
Jenna Lio Ricci
Flip the page to learn which foods drive her wild.
The culture might be less elevated and the ambiance less inviting than that of Allen & Delancey, but a hamster could do worse than score a gig at the Bethelhem, Pennsylvania, coed rodent dorm of behavioral neuroendocrinologist Jill Schaefer, Ph.D.

Schaefer's Lehigh University lab is lined with rows of special cages designed to encourage (and measure) the hamster equivalent of a Girls Gone Wild bacchanalia. Inside each apparatus, a female hamster is offered three choices. She can remain in her home cage or enter one of two tunnels, one leading to a "food box" and the other to a "sex box" containing a "sexually experienced, adult male hamster".

Just as a sorority sister might have to choose between watching gossip girls reruns, running to Taco Bell, or sexting the defensive lineman she met during a keg stand last night, so too does each female hamster confront a clash of desires. But for both ladles, the question — food or sex — isn't one of free will. It's one of metabolic state.

Will food, at this exact moment in time, feel better than sex? Turns out, it depends on how hungry you are.

Consider Table 54 again. The moment the woman starts eating her foil-grilled appetizer, her body begins to break it down into micronutrients: sugar, fat, and protein. As excess energy is stored as fat, a hormone called leptin is released and travels through the blood and across the blood-brain barrier into the hypothalamus. That's when the battle royal between food and sex begins.

Leptin cleaves the lane for naturally occurring hormones that jumpstart arousal. It also boxes out another signaling molecule, neuropeptide Y, that overacts appetite and blocks sex hormones. In other words, every bite the woman takes brings her closer to bed.
Murmurs spread through the room; heads swivel as we size up our neighbors. That guy pushing 400 pounds is definitely a superspitter, but I'd bet against the nerd with the shrink-wrapped joints and messenger bag. I notice the glance of a woman wearing black-framed glasses three rows back. We both look away.

Bartoshuk seeks out superspitters so she can produce more pronounced lab results, the same way an exercise physiologist might study athletes. The water helps her make the first cut. A coating of a bitter chemical compound called 6-n-propylthiouracil, or PROP, will cause a superspitter to gag, while others will just taste paper. Superspitters live in a neon-flavored world, she explains; everyone else is left with varying shades of palette.

Bartoshuk begins the culinary wherewithal. "First dip it in your tongue. If it's not too bitter, pop it in. And if that's not too bitter, really get it in there, work it around. And if you still can't detect anything, then, well, I'm sorry."

There's a rush of 400 wax envelopes and we raise our wafers, expectant. In they go, and within seconds the room devolves into polite chaos. Some berk, coughing; others narrow their brows, working the wafer furiously against the roofs of their mouths as if to will the bitterness into being. I spit out the wafers within seconds. I am a superspitter, I tell myself, holding onto my secret like Clark Kent. I turn around and lock eyes again with the woman with the black-framed glasses. This time, she smiles. "You, too?" Her face seems to say, I thrive and grin.

Bartoshuk asks for a show of hands and announces her tally. More than 9 percent are superspitters, 15 percent more than you'd usually find. She's intrigued, but we're just hungry. We're foodies, after all.

We shuffle like cattle out of the hall to find hummus and cheese, wine and beer, and a drug for dessert: the so-called miracle fruit, Synsepalum dulcificum, a red, pitachio-size berry from West Africa that binds to the

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Satisfy her

Want to impress actress Jessica Szohr? Just give her a burger, big guy. After 10 years of eating vegetarian, I tried my boyfriend. "She says, "I was overwhelmed. It was orgasmic." That's no surprise that the gossip girl actress fell hard and fast for hamburgers. For Szohr, 24, expectation isn't meant to be ignored. "My family makes fun of me," she says. "They say I eat like a man, but I love food that much."

That doesn't mean she wants to be trapped at a stuffy, four-star restaurant. "On a date, the atmosphere of a restaurant can be important," she says. "Good energy and good lighting put you in a great mood, before you've even had a bite. What woman wouldn't want that?"

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APPETIZERS + ORGASMS

We asked 8,000 men and women to compare food and sex. Here's how they indulge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I'd choose a lifetime of great sex over a lifetime of great food.</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm better at controlling my appetite than my sex drive.</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating an enormous meal turns me on.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a meal cooked for me turns me on.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's a turn-on to cook with my partner.</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe an adventurous eater is adventurous in the bedroom, too.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've brought food into the bedroom, or I'd like to.</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 8,000 visitors to Men's Health and Women's Health Magazine

MH
tongue and transposes the taste profile of acidic foods to sweet. Devotees have a name for the effect: flavor tripping.

I grab a handful of berries and a few slices of lemon and retreat to a bank of windows looking out over lower Manhattan. What began with a simple slideshow has suddenly become a meat market, with supertasters and flavor trippers all abuzz with the night’s revelations. Everything sour is now sweet; everything old is new. The raised cocktail tables and ambitious menu catalyze conversations, and I’m not alone for long.

“Hey... Matt,” says the woman I spotted inside, her head tilted to make out the scrum on my stick-on name tag. “How’s your flavor trip going?”

I see a berry clenched between her teeth, and there’s a wild look in her eyes.

“Not bad,” I say. “Want some of my lemon?”

She takes a wedge, chewing down like it’s a Cabo lime. “Mmm,” she says. “Sweet!” She grabs me by the wrist and pulls me through the throng to the spread of Mediterranean grub across the room.

“Try this,” she says, shoving a cube of cheese toward my mouth. I open, obligingly.

I remember a video I’d seen that morning or YouTube—Anthony Bourdain and Mario Batali waxing poetic about their craft. Food is the ultimate metaphor for sex, Batali had mused. How else can you make someone happy by putting something inside of them?

We linger there, sampling foods, comparing notes, and synchronizing tastes until the crowd thins. It’s just food, the stuff on our plates, and yet much more than raw calories. I wasn’t about to ask this flavor-tripping femme fatale what she liked in bed; I didn’t need to. You are what you eat, after all.

Thing is, the supertaster connection we shared was as much in our minds as it was on the tips of our tongues. “We don’t taste with our tongues or feel with our fingers—or other, ahem, areas,” Adam Pack, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at Utica College and a member of the Institute for Sensory Research in Syracuse, told me a few days later. “We do all those things with our brains.”

The fireworks begin in a strip of gray matter running like a headband from ear to ear. It’s called the somatosensory cortex. To understand the importance of this strip, consider the neuroanatomy of a concert violinist—Itzhak Perlman, let’s say. Perlman may have a few hundred more receptors than you do, and his may even be more sensitive or better arranged, thanks to Ma and Pa Perlman. But that’s not why Perlman can wring tears from an audience with a hunchback bow and a 1714 Stradivarius, and you can’t.

“Nobody is a born professional musician,” says Pack. “But the part of a violinist’s brain that ‘listens’ to his dominant hand gradually grows to become larger than the part that listens to the bow hand,” says Pack. “This develops over time—and it happens for other senses and other regions of the body, too.”

Experiencing new sensations—or finding new nuance in familiar ones—can create physical brain changes that make us more perceptive eaters and better lovers, says Pack. So just as Perlman’s practice regimen floods his brain with a variety of musical stimuli and broadens the parts of his brain behind audition and dexterity, so too had the couple at Table 24 boosted their gustatory processing power with every romantic meal before tonight.

What’s more, teaching your brain to detect the flavor components in a glass of cabernet
ways food turns her on

aphrodisiacs might be overtaken, but appetite and arousal still activate the same cerebral hot spots associated with emotion, memory, and reward. Here are four ways to turn her on at the table.

set the right mood. A casual, comfortable neighborhood spot with gentle lighting, rustic decor, and soft but upbeat background music is a perfect date spot. "A nice, slow meal naturally draws your attention to all five senses," says Paul Dobransky, M.D., author of The Secret Psychology of How We Fall In Love. (If you’re cooking at home, do your best to copy the same elements.) "It creates the sensual, intimate feeling that can help her unwind," says Dr. Dobransky.

show off your skills. Knowing your way around a pasta maker can pack more than a culinary punch. "Attention to subtle details and sensations in the kitchen and at the table suggests you’ll be equally attentive as a sexual partner," says Dr. Dobransky. Why bother rolling pasta by hand or deplating a cast-iron pan? While a little more than half of the women we surveyed said a good meal turns them on, a whopping 85 percent said watching you cook the meal fires them up.

feed her comfort foods. "Listening skills tend to be a woman’s hallmark," says James Miller, Ph.D., a professor of human sexuality at the University of Rhode Island. "Surprising her with her favorite foods shows her that you’ve paid attention and care about her pleasure." Bonus: Serving or ordering foods she associates with safety, satisfaction, or sex inspire those thoughts at the table.

spoon-feed her sex drive. The acts of cooking, dining, and indulging in food together are potent sensual experiences, giving you opportunities to cooperate, communicate, and synchronize your tastes. Choose restaurants that encourage sharing, or whip up a plate of tapas at home. "Sharing spicy, juicy, messy, and delicious foods awakens the senses," says Miller; "especially if you’re using your tongue, lips, or hands, since we associate these body parts with sex."

Carolyn Kylsira

is no different from teaching it to understand the hundreds of sensations during intercourse. Consider it cross-training: The same sensory apparatus that helps the woman at Table 34 detect the buttery slice of her paired Riesling Auslese wine or the velvety goosh of the roasted foie gras also picks up her date’s aroma, responds to the flick of his tongue on her as they kiss across the table, and detects his touch later.

"We literally taste, smell, and consume our lovers," says Beverly Whipple, Ph.D., a professor emerita at Rutgers University and coauthor of The Science of Orgasm. "The way the food looks, its texture, its aroma...all these things can spill over into your sex life, too."

Course 3

WHAT SEX CAN LEARN FROM FOOD

"Sex is as important as eating or drinking, and we ought to allow the one appetite to be satisfied with as little restraint or false modesty as the other."—Marquis de Sade

Crawling researchers are lousy comedians. After all, what kind of buzz kill turns a topic like carnal desire into a 42-page collection of footnotes, graphs, and citations? Ask any of them about the Coolidge effect, though, and it seems they all turn to Conan O’Brien.

President Calvin Coolidge and his wife once visited a poultry farm, so the joke goes. The First Lady, upon seeing the ratio of roosters to hens, marveled over the cock’s productivity: "How can you possibly make so many eggs with so few roosters?" she asked.

"Easy," said the farmer. "The roosters perform dozens of times a day."

"Perhaps you could point that out to Mr. Coolidge," chided the presumably unsatisfied First Lady.

"Doves of times with the same hen?"

President Coolidge returned.

"With many hens," clarified the farmer.

"Ah. Perhaps you could point that out to Mrs. Coolidge," said the President.

True or not, this yarn illustrates a crucial new finding in pleasure research. Our brains have two important ways of steering us toward rewards: wanting and liking. And it’s the wanting part, that makes the overlap between food and sex so intriguing.

"The wanting system in the brain is bigger anatomically, and also more powerful," explains Kent Berridge, Ph.D., a University of Michigan neuroscientist and the author of Pleasure in the Brain. "A male rat might like copulating with the same female over and over again, but he’ll stop wanting it as much with each successive encounter—he’ll stop having sex, basically. But a funny thing happens when a new female comes along: He’ll want sex just as much as before, regardless of how much he’s had with the original female."

In this way, clearly, most guys are rats.

The Coolidge effect isn’t just a sexual phenomenon. In a 2009 study using chocolate milk and potato chips, Dutch researchers showed that the same extinguishing of desire can occur almost instantaneously with specific tastes—salty, sweet, sour, and so on. It’s no surprise we seek out all-you-can-eat buffets and tasting menus. The variety we crave in sex we can actually find in food.

The culprit for our fickle desires is the powerful, multitasking neurotransmitter dopamine. While an opioid-controlled "liking" system makes us feel good once we’ve had a stimulus, dopamine could make us feel uncomfortable when we haven’t—sūr it creates an itch that screams for a scratch. This adds urgency to everything from basic needs, such as sex, to more abstract ones, such as conversation, music, or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. When you’re overly connected to the urge to consume the girl in your bed, or the Klondike bar in your freezer, for example, that’s dopamine at work. Dopamine makes crack addicts kill.

Crawling can feel like attentional lidding lights because the brain’s reward circuitry one had an important gig: survival. If a Cro-Magnon hadn’t been sufficiently wowed by the cold mammoth leftovers on his plate or the hairy mate in his cave, you think you’d be around to scarf caviar and surf YouPorn? Probably not.

Fortunately, evolution developed a fail-safe system for guiding our distant ancestors toward the stuff they needed to survive. In the wild, the opioid and dopaminergic parts of our brains seldom set alone—they’re linked, part of a loop of cooperating regions that come online to dole out reward.

"Desire for just about anything—sex, food, a sports car—activates the same circuitry in the brain," says Marc Pelchat, Ph.D., a researcher at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, who studies the human craving response using a bland food called "the Loaf." "The brain can even create cravings for things nobody would even like.

Trigger one part of the loop—the liking part, say—and a switch flips on the other, creating a veritable feedback loop of desire.

"That’s why it’s impossible to eat just one potato chip," says Barry Komisaruk, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Rutgers and a coauthor of The Science of Orgasm. "You eat the first because you like chips. But that ignites the wanting system. And soon you’ve eaten the entire bag."
Perhaps something similar is happening at Table 24. Everything from the ambiance of the brick-laid, candlelit room to the staffing—-a carefully orchestrated parade of sumptuous, ever-changing flavors—serves to heighten the sensual anticipation. By that math, the better the restaurant, the sooner she'll want to rip off your clothes.

I run my theory by one of the restaurant's managers later that night. She smiles and shakes her head. "Let's just say our bathrooms are expansive." 

**Course 4**

**WHY YOU WANT TO COVER HER IN WHIPPED CREAM**

* "Cooking is like sex; it's about giving pleasure. You can't climax too early."—CULINARY GORDON RAMSAY

"I'm all yours!" writes Eden, a 21-year-old Brit I've friended on PetLife.com, a sort of Myspace for pet freaks. "There are links to all my pictures on the left if you're into that kind of thing. I have a psychology degree, I love redecorating, snowboarding, motorbikes, and pole dancing. And, of course, sploshing."

Sploshing is a fetish in which devotees smear themselves with food, often during sex. While most of PetLife's pie-curious members aren't exactly appetizing, Eden's a buxom, flame-haired, pigtailed phoenix rising from a pile of foodstuffs in her photos, a treacle-covered diamond in the roughage. I've contacted her not to fawn over her pictures or to suggest poses or petting positions for her next shoot, but to demonstrate a uniquely human side of desire.

When you're a rodent, the desire to eat or reproduce isn't far removed from the blunting of your biological imperatives, with your actions controlled, in large part, by states of hunger and arousal—and by biochemical midddlemen like leptin and dopamine.

Work your way up the evolutionary flagpole, though, and food and sex become progressively more wedded to each other. White-fronted parrots regurgitate food into the mouths of their mates during make-out sessions. African elephants woo females with Peapod-like delivery service ("Need anything? I'm running out for some branches"). Chimp suitors bribe mates with sticks of sugarcane before copulating. And George Costanza, in an episode of Seinfeld, famously walked a pastrami sandwich during the act with his girlfriend. With billions of years of evolution behind the dinner date, who needs roses?

This rich overlap is brokered by our frontal lobes, the centers of planning and learning located just above our eyes—the brain's CPUs, in a sense. Thanks to the frontal lobes, humans add a third major piece to the motivational engine. All animals have wanting and liking, but only humans and their close primate relatives add *thinking* to the mix.

Eden describes her first sploshing session like this: "We used mustard and Angel Delight (a whipped pudding), and kept the amounts small. I wore a crisp white shirt, black designer pencil skirt, heels, and black tights. I felt silly as I began to pour the food over my breasts—I didn't know whether I was doing it right, or what I was supposed to feel. But as I poured custard on myself, shedding the blouse and pouring it directly on my skin, my face started glowing."

How could a moment so awkward suddenly turn so, well, hot?

"Human cognitive capacity transforms and elaborates pleasure," explains Berdige. In other words, if you believe organic eggs taste better than regular eggs, they will. Your frontals will make it so. They also have the power to pull an invisible flavor on your tongue. Imagine a juicy steak. Can you practically taste it? Probably so.

Your frontal lobes also regulate associative memory, which explains why a sip of the same wine you had on vacation instantly reminds you of the woman you shared it with—and can even cause a stirring in your pants. Our frontal lobes are why foods trigger fantasies instead of just filling us up.

In Eden's case, pouring food on herself became sexy thanks to her frontal lobes. They constructed a craving from whole cloth, masquerading two completely unrelated stimuli—food and sex—together—that as a pair have no bearing whatsoever on survival.

Associative memory is one of the most powerful aphrodisiacs, in fact. Eden can't even bang out her grocery list now without thinking about sex. "Sploshing is now a very sensual experience," Eden tells me. "I'll see a big creamy cake in the store, and a flirtatious sideways glance at my boyfriend will have him know I'm considering it—to sit on, naturally. It's been opened up another type of flirting—one that not many other people would pick up on."

Unnecessarily, you're crouched in the corner of a restaurant like Allen & Delaney. It's late, and Table 24 has reached the end of the meal: *pasta piemelfina cotta* with a salted dark chocolate sorbet. An innocent drizzle of chocolate syrup lands on the chest of the woman. As she dabs her shirt, they both giggle. This is their fifth course, and yet somehow, they still look hungry. **

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**The Aphrodisiac Myth**

History's most heralded aphrodisiacs are all the rage when listed in the harsh light of science. Here's your little guide to the so-called libido boosters.

**CHOCOLATE**

Chocolate is full of amphetamine and phenylethylamine; two compounds that cause her body to release the same feel-good endorphins triggered by sex and physical exertion. Coffee also contains methylnorharmane, which makes sex sensitive to every oral touch. A team of U.S. and Canadian researchers found that chocolate stimulates the same brain centers that respond to cocaine, but that eating too much can eliminate the effect. Aim for dark chocolate, which packs more cocoa than lighter milk chocolate, and keeps portions small.

**PHYSICAL EFFECT**

**OYSTERS**

These slippery shellfish have been the subject of love for centuries, but it wasn't until 2005 that a team of researchers identified two amino acids in shellfish that had been linked in another study to increased sexual hormone release in rats. If that's not a tenuous enough link to love, consider that oysters are high in zinc, which regulates some sexual hormones and boosts semen production. Critics question just how potent the shellfish really are, but the history of shellfish as a heralded aphrodisiac, and the intimacy of consumption—slurping it from the shell—could contribute to a small psychosomatic boost.

**PHYSICAL EFFECT**

**WATERMELON**

The summer staple contains citrulline, a nutrient that relaxes blood vessels throughout the body in a similar way Viagra works below the belt, according to Texas A&M researchers. A 4-ounce serving contains 150 milligrams of citrulline, but the researchers haven't yet established what dosage is necessary to stimulate a sexual appetite. If you're giving it a try, juice an entire wedge: the rind contains 80 percent more citrulline than the fruit.

**PHYSICAL EFFECT**

**PARCHMENT OR VAGINAL FOODS**

Suggestive staples—bananas, avocados, strawberries—might not pack a physical punch, but they can still prompt provocative thoughts, early associative instincts, and providing a flirtatious food toy, says University of Michigan neuroscientist Kent Berdige. No kidding? No problem. Feed her foods with your fingers, like strawberries or sugar, and lie your digits longer on her lips.

**PHYSICAL EFFECT**

**ALCOHOL**

Booze acts as a depressant in the brain's cerebral cortex, lowering inhibitions that could otherwise restrain arousal. Too much, though, and your decision-making skills plummet, according to a 2007 study published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. Another reason to put aside your glass, while you're at it: Research from the University of Washington found that intoxicated men with blood alcohol levels of 0.8 to 1.0 percent (about two or three drinks) had lower "peak erection levels," or hardness. So kiss a bottle of cab with her and whisk her off to bed.

**PHYSICAL EFFECT**

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Erin Harris