The Anosmia Sandwich

By Leah Holzel

Serves 4

We never know what a person will bring of themselves to a successful approach to their condition. But all successful approaches have in common an individual's sense of discovery. For me, the special adventure of discovering my flavor system in the absence of smell tapped a deep well of curiosity, that outweighed my fear of the new and wholly unimaginable sensory perspective anosmia gave me. We are flavor-seeking creatures. Nothing had ever forced my hand so powerfully to use my sense of discovery.

The Anosmia Sandwich *was the first recipe I wrote, at the beginning of my smell loss—once I had committed myself to a positive outcome. That commitment allowed me to be alert to, appreciative of, and build upon the reality of my perceptions. The recipe is very simple—a whimsical, open-face number that works with fundamental perceptions of color, texture, touch and taste. Below the recipe, I've included some of the questions I was curious about when designing this dish. At a time when food was an unfamiliar stranger,* ***The Anosmia Sandwich*** *was my welcome friend and culinary mascot.*

Ingredients:

- Two 10 oz sweet potatoes, such as jewel or garnet varieties
- 4 slices seeded whole-grain sourdough artisan bread
- 3 tablespoons salted cultured butter, at room temperature
- 1⅓ cups curry sauerkraut (such as Hosta Hill brand), drained slightly
- 6 oz raw, unpeeled beets, shredded (about 1¼ cups)

Directions:

1. Arrange oven rack on the lowest rung. Pre-heat the oven to 375°. Wrap the sweet potatoes in foil, place directly on the rack and bake, turning once, until the potatoes are very soft when squeezed, about 1 hour* *(see Dutch Oven question below)*. Transfer to a bowl and let cool slightly before unwrapping, about 30 minutes. Using your fingers, peel away and discard the skin, reserving the flesh and any residual syrup. Smash to a spreadable consistency. (Sweet potatoes can be baked in advanced and refrigerated, peeled or not, for up to 5 days.)
2. Generously butter the bread. Smear each slice with sweet potato spread. Top with sauerkraut well tousled, then shredded beets. Serve open-face.

Questions:

What form of butter, a seemingly subtle ingredient, has the most developed potential for flavor?
Cultured butter differs from so-called *sweet butter* in its amplified flavor and tang created when fresh cream is seeded with lactic cultures and allowed to "ripen" before churning. Fermentation produces the aromatic compound *diacetyl*, which imparts buttery and milky notes, magnifying the inherent flavor already present in butterfat.

How can I use cooking method to intensify the qualities of sweet potatoes?
Baking sweet potatoes in their jackets in foil packets, caramelizes the sugars, concentrates the flavor, and creates a luxurious texture (we perceive the "mouthfeel" as all the *more* satiny *because* of the sweetness!). Moist varieties, such as deep orange-colored Jewel and Garnet sweet potatoes, convert 75% of their starch to sugar when cooked, becoming super syrupy.

Without olfactory feedback, I sometimes forget there's something cooking as soon as I walk out of the kitchen. How can I equip my kitchen so I feel more secure?
A Dutch oven is my failsafe piece of equipment. An enamel-coated cast iron pot with a cover, it facilitates slow, even cooking with much lower risk of burning or scorching the contents I may leave unattended.

*The sweet potatoes for this recipe—as forgiving as they are—can be baked in a Dutch oven with gorgeous results.

What food ingredient would make a good addition to my smell-training practice?
Beets have a bold, saturated color, sweetness and crunch that actively engages our senses. But we're also keenly sensitive to their muted scent—suggestive of earthy, clean, organic matter. That's the smell of geosmin, also the molecule responsible for the archetypal earth-essence smell of wet ground after rainfall. Humans can detect geosmin in extremely low concentrations. I added beetroot powder (found in health food stores) to my smell-training kit very early on.

Sauerkraut arouses my appetite and satiates my hunger. Why is it so satisfying in spite of my smell loss?
Fermentation releases the *full umami potential* of cabbage (a good source of glutamate) with its rewarding ability to linger on the palate. Raw, unpasteurized curry kraut is a superstar sensation-wise: from "savoriness," to sour and salty, to crunchy and effervescent, to its brilliant yellow color, fiery red chilies, and aromatic seasoning. HOSTA HILL makes some of the best krauts on the planet—each variety in unique, vibrant technicolor.

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