

# *A Taste of Memory*

REPORT

A white paper on the science  
behind memory, taste,  
and connection

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Contrary to popular belief, the memories that shape us most are not always tied to life’s biggest milestones. Research suggests that experiences involving people we care about often become especially meaningful over time. Weekly dinners, summer cookouts, after-school conversations, and familiar beverages shared with loved ones can become powerful memory anchors because they combine sensory richness, and social connection.”



***Long after a summer ends, we often forget the details of a day but remember exactly how it felt. A sip of iced tea on a front porch, the smell of burgers on a backyard grill, watermelon shared at a family picnic - these sensory experiences rooted in food and drink can instantly transport us back to a moment, a place, and the people who were there with us.***

In fact, many of the memories that stay with us longest are not tied to major milestones at all. They emerge from everyday experiences sharing meals, gathering with loved ones, and enjoying familiar foods and beverages that become woven into the fabric of our lives.

Science suggests this isn't coincidence. Food and drink occupy a unique place in our memory system because they engage multiple senses at once while often accompanying moments of connection and meaningful rituals. Together, these sensory and social experiences create especially rich memory traces. As a result, food-and-drink-related memories are often more vivid, emotional, and enduring than other everyday experiences, remaining accessible years later through a familiar taste, smell, or shared tradition.

Research also shows that positive memories don't simply help us remember the past but also

strengthen wellbeing in the present. Recalling uplifting moments can increase positive emotions, reduce stress, foster connection, and even inspire motivation. In this way, memory becomes more than just a record of our lives, it becomes an essential resource for living well.

Positive memories function almost like an emotional savings account. While a pleasant experience may last only minutes or hours in the moment, the memory of it can continue providing value long afterward. Research suggests that revisiting meaningful experiences can help people feel more connected, resilient, optimistic, and capable of coping with everyday stress. In other words, the benefits of a positive experience do not necessarily end when the moment is over—they can be renewed each time the memory is recalled.



**Many of the memories that stay with us longest are not tied to major milestones at all. They emerge from everyday experiences sharing meals, gathering with loved ones, and enjoying familiar foods and beverages that become woven into the fabric of our lives.**

This report explores the science behind why food and drink play such a powerful role in memory formation, how taste and smell become gateways to nostalgia, and what individuals can do to create more memorable moments with the people they care about most.



***Want joy? Lean on amplifying positive moments and build uplifting memories:***

In our hectic lives, it's easy to miss moments that can spark delight. While we often associate happiness with major experiences, with the right mindset, routine activities, such as engaging in a conversation or appreciating the sensory experiences all around us, can offer genuine relief, both now and later. So can recalling past joyful events—dwelling on good memories can boost your wellbeing and spark a positive cycle, inspiring you to connect with people and activities that matter (Fiorito & Routledge, 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023).

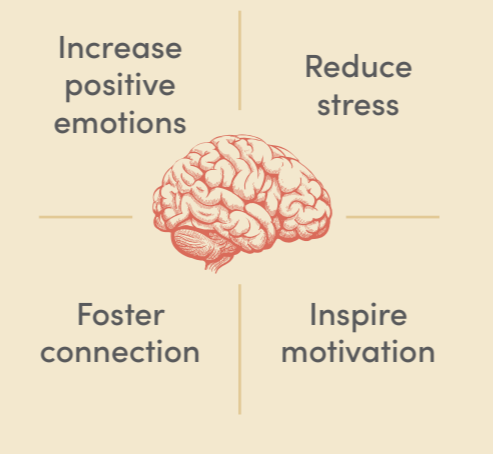
Various areas in your brain are involved in memory, including the hippocampus, which stores engrams, traces of information for retrieval, almost like an index (Tanaka & McHugh, 2018). Then there's the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), a brain region that is involved in both organizing personal memories and guiding future behavior (de Sousa et al., 2026; Nawa & Ando, 2019).

Since memory doesn't only impact the past, it also influences your future, it's worth paying attention to strengthening your ability to remember. If you want to improve your memory, intentionally attending to the present moment is worthwhile. Further, being present paves the way to experiencing joy and allows you to create pleasant memories you can recall when you need a pick-me-up, elevating your mood as well as your ability to cope with daily hassles and stress (Chen et al., 2026; Speer & Delgado, 2017).

***The ease of reexperiencing happiness through memories:***

Why is memory so powerful that it can dampen stress? Past positive events interrupt current distress while broadening your perspective. Plus, positive emotions are associated with an improved ability to manage emotions to do what matters. (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

***Positive memories can:***



***“Positive memories aren't sentimental luxuries—they are psychological assets.”***



## Why Everyday Food & Drink Occasions Become Memory Anchors

While sensory richness helps explain why food memories are so vivid, another reason they endure is that food sits at the intersection of two fundamental human needs: nourishment and connection.

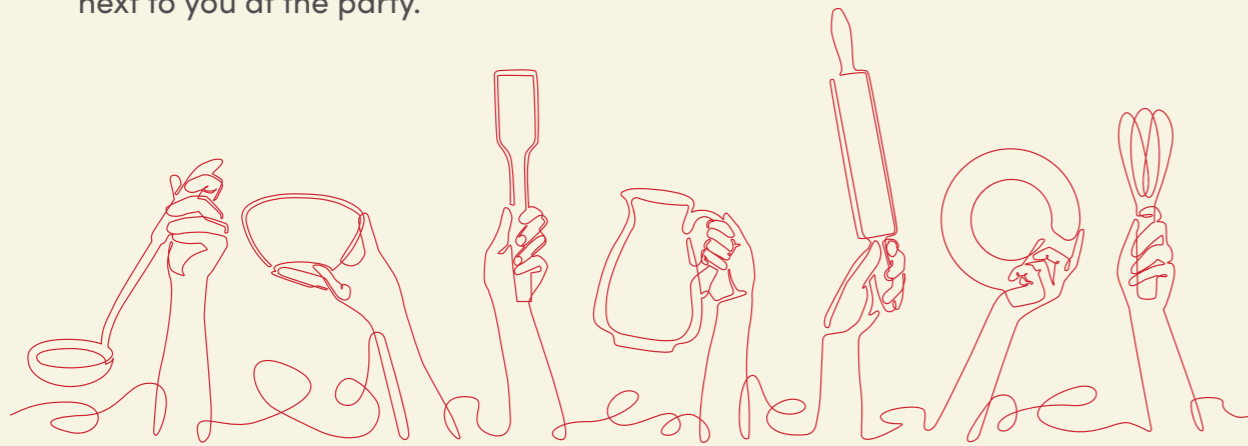
Contrary to popular belief, the memories that shape us most are not always tied to life's biggest milestones. Research suggests that experiences involving people we care about often become especially meaningful over time. Weekly dinners, summer cookouts, after-school conversations, and familiar beverages shared with loved ones can become powerful memory anchors because they combine, sensory richness, and social connection.

Sharing meals with people you care about isn't simply a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. It can become the foundation of a memory that continues to provide comfort, connection, and joy long after the meal itself has ended.

**A favorite beverage can become part of the ritual itself—a glass of iced tea on a summer porch, a drink shared during a backyard barbecue, or the familiar taste that accompanies a weekly family meal.**

We often feel especially moved when we reflect on memories connected with people who matter, or experiences rich in social context. While food activates specific reward circuits in your brain, positive interactions with others also activate neural reward systems ([Haber & Knutson, 2010](#); [Wake & Izuma, 2017](#)). Recalling meals shared with others stimulates a host of pleasure centers in your mind. Studies confirm that when given a choice, we prefer to reminisce about experiences we've shared with people. Remarkably, given the benefits of social support, revisiting memories that include loved ones reduces cortisol after exposure to a stressor ([Speer & Delgado, 2021](#)).

It's easy to associate eating with celebrating, but beyond those special moments, recalling dining with people you cherish is a particularly powerful way to revisit the past. When it comes to remembering, not all memories are stored and retrieved equally. Memory is especially fine-tuned when it comes to content designed to protect you. Given the potential risk or reward inherent in what we consume, eating and drinking elicit particularly striking recollections. If you bring to mind a recent special event, notice how you can almost taste the sweetness of a particular dessert—yet you may have no recall of what you were wearing that very night and can't summon the name of your friend's friend who was sitting next to you at the party.



### Food Engages All the Senses

Food memories may be especially powerful because they engage nearly every sensory system at once. When people are fully immersed in an experience through taste, smell, sight, touch, and even sound, the memory becomes more deeply encoded and easier to retrieve later.

Given the multisensory experience of consuming food and drinks, combining a wealth of input across perceptual domains, from specific smells to an amalgam of tastes ([Egan, 2024](#)), not to mention social and emotional factors, eating allows for highly specific encoding (e.g., [Yang et al., 2025](#); [Yadav et al., 2022](#)). Amazingly, odor-evoked

memories can immediately bring us back to the past as smelling activates the amygdala, your brain's emotional center ([Herz, 2016](#)). A rainy day may feel like another day, but your grandmother's soup – or even the smell of it simmering on the stove – is inimitable and is accessible for years.



## Why Food Triggers Nostalgia

It's no wonder that smell and taste are potent drivers of nostalgia, a phenomenon experts label the Proust Effect. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust details eating and smelling a madeleine cake dipped in tea, which suddenly transports him back to his childhood ([Green et al., 2023](#)). Food and beverages can serve as "social surrogates," reminding us of close others who were present when we savored them, reminding us of home ([Reid et al., 2025](#)).

Nostalgia, or experiencing positive emotions by revisiting cherished memories, both reduces present loneliness and promotes well-being ([Abeyta, Routledge, & Kaslon, 2020](#); [Layous & Kurtz, 2023](#)).

The Proust Effect illustrates what scientists now understand about sensory memory: because food and drink engage multiple senses simultaneously, they create exceptionally rich memory traces that can be reactivated years later by a familiar taste or aroma.



**Did you know?**

Smell and taste are among the most powerful triggers of autobiographical memory.

Touch

Sight

Smell

Taste

Hearing

Knowing how powerful memories can be, it's an investment in your wellbeing to be intentional in creating them. To protect and strengthen your innate propensity to recall eating, you need to bring your attention to the experience, noticing and pivoting from the urge to multitask, especially these days when more than half of adults in the U.S. say they use their smartphone "too much" (Gallup, 2022). As you know if you've ever eaten while scrolling, that can also result in mindlessly snacking. It's also hard to feel full and appreciate the richness of the experience in a way you can process and recall it without singular focus. In studies, eliminating distractions boosts your memory of eating, heightening your satisfaction and satiety—preventing you from overconsuming in the moment and slipping into unnecessary consumption later (Seitz et al., 2021). Sharpening your focus primes you to attend to details of special moments you overlook when you half-heartedly attend (Lindsay et al., 2018).

“**Fully attending to your innate superpower of savoring and recalling taste and smell makes food a powerful way to access special memories, especially when you need a dose of connection and joy.**”

More generally, routinely investing a few minutes in the practice of mindfulness, or exercising present nonjudgemental awareness, sets you up for success—boosting functioning in your prefrontal cortex, supporting your memory, decision making, and ability to manage your emotions (Calderone et al., 2024).



# 01 Practice present focus

Developing the ability to be present with an attitude of acceptance or openness increases your ability to experience positive emotions in your daily life (Lindsay et al., 2018). Spending anywhere from two to ten minutes each day slowing down to try a practice such as bringing your full attention to your breathing as you inhale and exhale, gently bringing your mind back when it inevitably wanders, can quickly enhance your wellbeing (Palmer et al., 2023; Saketh et al., 2026). Rather than expecting to have the ability to

soak up joy on demand, it's key to routinely practice centering your focus to attend to the good that's immediately present. Consider if there is a good window in your day to carve out a few minutes, say first thing in the morning, or when commuting at the end of your workday before you walk in the door, to hone your ability to notice and commit to your goal rather than let your attention pull you in endless directions away from the gift of your breath and your awe-inspiring senses.

**A Simple Formula for**



**BE PRESENT**

NOTICE THE EXPERIENCE

**SHARE IT**

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

**SAVOR IT**

BE FULLY PRESENT

**REMEMBER IT**

REVISIT IT LATER FOR COMFORT, CONNECTION, AND JOY



## 02 Savor the experience of eating

The fact that food and drinks are full of delightful smells and tastes is even more reason to commit to monotasking, the practice of doing one thing at a time, while you eat. Given how ever-present and addictive our smartphones can feel, and how compelling multitasking can seem, committing to putting down distractions while you're enjoying food or drink to truly attend to details, like the feeling of a cold glass in your hand, and subtle flavors such as a refreshing hint of lemon, as well as your sense of satiety, clearly enhances both your pleasure and wellbeing (Ali et al., 2024; Warren et al., 2017). When you focus on the flavors, aromas, textures, and

company around you, you create richer memories that are easier to revisit later. Consider creating simple rituals such as device-free dinners, lingering post-meal over a favorite beverage, or taking a moment to notice what you appreciate about a meal before moving on to the next task.

It may be worthwhile to playfully introduce a bin to collect devices at mealtimes to reduce the habit of peeking at your phone, which, on average, people do once every five minutes (Wheelwright, 2026). Even a few mindful meals each week can strengthen satisfaction, enjoyment, and memory formation.



## 03 Connect with others

Sharing meals with others is linked to happiness and life satisfaction. Yet these days, surveys highlight in the U.S., there is a stark decline in eating meals together (DeNeve et al., 2026). Rather than bemoaning loneliness, waiting for an invitation, or putting pressure on yourself to create an Instagram-worthy gathering, brainstorm ways to reach out and initiate more casual get-togethers. It's easy to focus on creating a plan with someone you know well, but perhaps you have an elderly neighbor or friend you haven't seen in years that would appreciate feeling included in an impromptu potluck. Because we all eat several times a day, opportunities for

connection are already built into our schedules. Choosing one meal each week to share with others—whether it's Sunday brunch or a casual weeknight dinner—can turn a pleasant idea into a lasting tradition. These have the opportunity to become memories we cherish most.



## 04 Revisit positive memories

Given our negativity bias, or the human tendency to pay more attention to threats and upsetting experiences, it's easy to zoom in and repeatedly revisit the worst moments ([Baumeister et al., 2001](#)). To counter that, routinely think about a recent highlight reel from your life. Beyond simply listing what you're grateful for, can you more wholeheartedly revisit a meaningful moment using your senses? Picture where you were, who was with you, what you could smell, taste, hear, and feel. The more vividly you reconstruct a positive memory, the more likely you are to reexperience some of

the positive emotions associated with it. Consider sharing favorite memories with loved ones, looking through photos, or recreating meaningful recipes and traditions that help bring special moments back to life. When someone casually asks about a recent long weekend, rather than quickly saying it was "Nice!," offering details like the colors of a sunset you caught or a moment that made you belly laugh, isn't boasting or oversharing, it spreads joy and strengthens your relationships ([Craske et al., 2023](#); [Reis et al., 2010](#)).



## 05 Anticipate and Design Meaningful Gatherings

With all you may be juggling, it's easy to approach future events with a sense of obligation. If you're facing a challenge, rather than worry about all the things that might go wrong, plan viable solutions. For example, if family mealtimes are always a time you have to prepare vs. savor, consider inviting others to contribute dishes, simplifying the menu, or assigning responsibilities in advance. Research suggests that looking forward to positive experiences can boost wellbeing even before the event occurs.

Consider creating a "memory meal" tradition where everyone contributes a food or beverage connected to a meaningful life experience. Sharing the stories behind those choices can deepen connection and transform an ordinary gathering into a memorable one.

By reducing friction, you make it easier to be present for the moments that ultimately become cherished memories.

In a culture that often encourages us to rush through experiences, food and drink invite us to slow down and notice what matters. They bring together the ingredients most likely to create lasting memories: sensory richness, and human connection.

The science is increasingly clear that positive memories are more than reflections of meaningful moments—they are resources we can draw upon to support wellbeing, resilience, and connection. The experiences we create today can continue enriching our lives months or even years later each time they are remembered. And because food and drink are woven into everyday life, they offer one of the most accessible ways to create those memories in the first place.

Contrary to what many people assume, the memories that sustain us are not always tied to life's biggest occasions. More often, they are built through moments of connection—a weekly family dinner, a familiar summer gathering, or a favorite beverage shared with people we love. These everyday occasions become the stories we revisit, the comfort we draw upon, and the memories that help shape who we are.

***Food and drink don't simply accompany our memories. They help create them.***



Dr. Jenny L. Taitz, Psy.D., is board certified in cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy and is an assistant clinical professor in psychiatry at University of California, Los Angeles. Passionate about spreading evidence-based techniques to a wide audience, she frequently writes for the New York Times and Wall Street Journal and presents her work on leading podcasts, including Ten Percent Happier and NPR's Life Kit. She is also the author of Stress Resets: How to Soothe Your Body and Mind in Minutes which earned the Seal of Merit from the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies for allegiance to science and readability. Dr. Taitz also maintains a clinical practice, LA CBT DBT.

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