Public Humanities (2026), 2, e15, 1–6
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10118

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Taste Archives

Aditi Ekka

PhD Scholar, Department of English, St Joseph's University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India
Email: aeditz.ae@gmail.com

(Received 03 October 2025; revised 19 December 2025; accepted 11 January 2026)

Abstract

What would it mean to build an archive not of texts or images, but of tastes, sounds, silences, and gestures, the fleeting traces through which memory takes shape? This essay proposes "taste archives" as a method within the public humanities for engaging communities around everyday acts of remembering and belonging. Beginning with chai as a personal anchor of migrant memory, I move outward to imagine a framework for archiving food-related stories and practices. The process unfolds in three movements: (1) gathering oral histories through food-centered conversations; (2) recording recipes, smells, tastes, and the sonic-material rhythms that accompany them; and (3) curating these into accessible, community-based collections, whether in libraries, cultural centers, or digital spaces. Along the way, I reflect on questions of consent, ownership, and the difficulty of translating sensory experience into archival form. "Taste archives," I suggest, democratize heritage by placing ordinary rituals-meals, drinks, shared preparation at the center of cultural memory. By making the invisible histories of migration and daily life tangible and audible, the public humanities can reimagine the archive itself as something that can be sipped, smelled, and heard: a living practice of remembering together.

Keywords: food heritage; migration; public memory; sensory humanities; sonic practices; taste archives

How to remember taste? This essay approaches that question through everyday acts of sipping, serving, and sharing food and drink, asking how fleeting sensory experiences can become sites of collective memory rather than private nostalgia. I propose the idea of "taste archives" not as attempts to preserve taste itself (an impossible task) but as public-facing practices that gather stories, gestures, sounds, and recollections that emerge around food. They are processes that listen to how memory circulates through ordinary practices, particularly among migrant and marginalized communities whose histories are often absent from official records.

1. Preserving chai

Chai is ordinary to the point of invisibility in much of India. It is made without ceremony, served without announcement, and consumed without reflection. Yet for me, as a migrant student living away from home, chai became one of the few rituals that consistently made

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unfamiliar places feel inhabitable. It was not only the taste that mattered. Before chai arrived as taste, it arrived as rhythm. These sensory cues—sound, gesture, timing carried memory in ways that words alone could not. Over time, I began to notice that my memories of migration were not stored as neat narratives, but as fragments activated by the body: the smell of tea leaves, the heat of a cup passed between hands, the silence that briefly settles when people drink together. These moments were fleeting, but they were not insignificant. They were how belonging was practiced.

When I first came to Bangalore for my studies, everything felt new in a way that was exhausting rather than exciting. The city was bigger than I had imagined, louder, faster, and less forgiving. By the time I reached the College hostel with my bags, I was already tired from trying to take everything in.

That very first evening, my new roommates and I went out for chai. None of us really knew each other yet. We had only exchanged names, maybe a few polite questions about where we were from. The chai place was right across the college gate, the kind of small stall that students gather around without thinking too much about it. It was already familiar to the space, even though it was new to us. We stood there with paper cups in our hands, unsure of how to begin a conversation. There were long pauses, the kind that feel awkward only because you are still learning how to sit inside them with other people. We tried to think of topics like college, classes, the hostel rooms, but nothing quite settled. At times like that, I found myself staring at the chai-wale bhaiya instead. I watched him pour milk into the pot, stir the tea leaves, and lift the kettle slightly to check the colour. The process held my attention more easily than conversation. It gave me something steady to look at, something I already knew how to understand.

I have always been a chai person. At home, five in the evening is chai time. No matter how the day has gone, that time arrives quietly and without negotiation. Chai, for me, has always felt like home, about as close to home as you can get without being there. Standing there that evening, holding my cup, I realized that the chai tasted exactly the same as it did back home. That sameness mattered. It grounded me. Even though the people around me were new, the city was unfamiliar, and the hostel still strange, this small act felt recognisable. But the chai did something else. It made the silence easier to carry. For a few minutes, we were not strangers trying to perform friendliness; we were just people standing together, sipping tea at the end of the day. Later, this moment returns more clearly than many others. Not the paperwork, not the hostel rules, not even the first day of class. What I remember is standing across the college, watching tea being made, holding a cup that tasted like home.

Such moments rarely appear in official accounts of migration or student life, yet they play a role in how people orient themselves in unfamiliar places. Here, taste operates less as flavour than as timing and familiarity-a small, repeatable practice that makes transition manageable. The chai memory I have just described does not demand preservation in the conventional sense. There is no need to freeze that evening, to reproduce the exact taste, or to turn it into an exhibit. In fact, trying to do so would miss the point. What matters is not the flavour itself, but the way that flavour became a point of orientation in a moment of uncertainty. This distinction is important because it shapes what I mean by a "taste archive."

2. Taste archives as public humanities

In practical terms, a taste archive is a public humanities tool for gathering food-centered narratives in ways that foreground sensory memory. Taste archives do not store taste as an

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

object; they function as public memory practices that gather and circulate stories, conversations, and sensory recollections around food and drink.

Public archives, as we usually imagine them, struggle to hold such experiences. Libraries, museums, and state repositories are designed to preserve texts, images, and objects-things that can be fixed, catalogued, and stabilized. Much of everyday life, however, resists this logic. And yet, these are often the very registers through which people remember who they are and where they come from.

Recent work in the Public Humanities has urged scholars to attend to these forms of everyday memory. Sarah Pink describes this shift as a "multisensory turn," a move toward understanding culture not only through what is written or seen, but through what is heard, touched, smelled, and felt in the body.[1] For public memory work, this matters because communities often remember through practices rather than documents: through cooking, hosting, sharing, and repeating everyday rituals.

Public humanities has long been concerned with how memory is produced outside formal institutions. Oral histories, community cookbooks, neighborhood exhibitions, and participatory storytelling projects have shown that people often remember through doing rather than documenting. Community cookbooks offer a useful parallel.[2] Long before digital archives or formal public history projects, they functioned as informal records of everyday life, often produced by women's groups, churches, or migrant communities. These cookbooks preserved more than recipes: they recorded social relations, migration histories, religious calendars, and practices of care. Seen this way, community cookbooks already operate as partial taste archives, documenting how taste is remembered and narrated rather than how it is objectively experienced. A recipe annotated with "made during exams" or "for Sunday evenings" situates food within lived time rather than abstract tradition. Taste archives extend this logic by foregrounding the sensory and narrative dimensions that cookbooks often hold implicitly: the sounds of preparation, the gestures of serving, the pauses and conversations that surround food and drink. In doing so, they build on an existing public humanities practice rather than inventing a new one.

Food has played a quiet but persistent role in these practices, offering a way into stories that might otherwise remain untold. What taste archives contribute to this tradition is a deliberate focus on the sensory dimensions of those stories: the sounds, gestures, timings, and embodied habits through which memory takes shape. To speak about taste in public humanities work, however, requires care. Taste has long been theorized in relation to class and distinction. Pierre Bourdieu famously showed how taste operates as a marker of social difference, shaping who belongs where and why.[3] Rather than treating taste primarily as a mechanism of distinction, I am interested in taste as a medium of memory, one that is shared, repeated, and reworked across contexts, especially in moments of movement and transition.

3. Taste archives in practice

As Arjun Appadurai reminds us, migration is not simply movement across space, but an ongoing negotiation of belonging.[4] For migrants, memory is often carried in portable,

[1] Pink 2015.
[2] For discussions of community cookbooks as social and historical records, see Bower 1997.
[3] Bourdieu 1984.
[4] Appadurai 1996.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

repeatable acts such as brewing tea, preparing familiar food, or recreating sounds and gestures that momentarily anchor the body in continuity. These practices do not always announce themselves as "heritage," yet they quietly sustain histories of movement, loss, adaptation, and care. Taste archives emerge at this intersection of sensory life, migration, and public memory. By "taste archives," I do not mean attempts to scientifically capture or reproduce flavour. Following Connerton, taste archives recognize that some memories remain embodied and should not be inscribed.[5] Instead, I propose taste archives as a framework for selective, ethical, and participatory memory work, one that records stories "about" taste, rather than taste itself.

In practical terms, this might look like food-centered oral history projects, community cookbooks enriched with recorded conversations, exhibitions that combine sound, narrative, and demonstration, or digital collections where people speak about how food travels with them across homes and cities. What is being archived in these cases is not flavour, but meaning: how taste becomes a vehicle for memory, belonging, and identity.

For migrants, students, and others living between places, taste often becomes one of the few elements of daily life that feels repeatable. It does not erase difference or difficulty, but it offers a point of familiarity. In public humanities terms, these moments matter because they reveal how people make sense of change in ordinary ways. They show how memory is practiced quietly, without ceremony, through acts that are rarely archived or recognized as historical. Designing a taste archive, then, is not about inventing a new method from scratch. It is about adapting existing public humanities practices to attend more closely to sensory life.

The first step is food-centered conversation. Rather than beginning with abstract questions about identity or heritage, taste archives begin with shared practices. Conversations unfold around making tea, cooking a meal, or eating together. Participants are invited to speak about when and where certain foods matter to them, what moments they associate with them, and how these practices have changed over time. The emphasis here is not on extracting information, but on creating a space where memory can surface naturally.

The second step involves recording sensory narratives, rather than attempting to capture sensory experience itself. This might include audio recordings of people describing sounds associated with cooking or drinking, photographs of everyday settings, or short written reflections on how taste intersects with place and time. What is recorded is not taste as data, but taste as story-how people remember it, explain it, and situate it within their lives.

The third step is community curation. Taste archives only become public when participants have a say in how their stories are shared. This may take the form of small exhibitions, digital collections, listening stations, or printed compilations. Importantly, the archive does not have to be permanent or centralized. It can be temporary, mobile, and revisable. What matters is that it remains accessible and accountable to the people whose memories it holds.

Seen this way, taste archives do not compete with museums or state archives. They complement them by foregrounding forms of memory that are often considered too ordinary, too fleeting, or too subjective to preserve. They also acknowledge limits. Not every memory needs to be archived. Some practices remain meaningful precisely because

[5] Connerton 1989.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they are lived rather than recorded. The role of the public humanities here is not to collect indiscriminately, but to notice where sensory memory opens up conversation, connection, and care. Returning to the chai outside my college, what could be archived is not the taste of the tea, but the story of that first evening: the hesitation between strangers, the comfort of familiarity, the role of an ordinary drink in easing the transition into a new life. When such stories are gathered across people and places, they begin to form a collective record of how belonging is negotiated in everyday terms. Taste archives, then, are less about preservation and more about relation. They offer a way of bringing private memory into public conversation without stripping it of its texture. In doing so, they invite the public humanities to pay closer attention to how memory moves through bodies, routines, and shared moments-often quietly, but with lasting effect.

4. Care, limits, and public responsibility in taste archives

Taste archives raise ethical questions not because sensory memory is fragile, but because it is shared. Food memories rarely belong to individuals alone; they emerge within families, religious communities, hostels, and migrant networks. Any public humanities project working with such memories must therefore attend carefully to consent, authorship, and circulation.[6]

They do not aim to record everyday practices as heritage by default, nor to transform routine acts into permanent records. Instead, they take shape only when participants choose to reflect on and share their experiences, often at moments of transition or uncertainty. This makes participation, rather than preservation, the central ethical principle. Practically, this means designing archives that remain flexible and revisable. Contributors should be able to shape how their stories are presented, where they circulate, and whether they remain public over time. Taste archives work best when they function as temporary, collaborative spaces, allowing public memory to remain responsive, situated, and accountable.

Seen this way, the chai outside my college is not preserved as an artifact but shared as a story —one among many through which public humanities can document migration without monumentalizing it.

Through the example of chai, the essay has shown how taste operates as a quiet but durable anchor in moments of movement, especially during early encounters with unfamiliar places. These moments rarely appear in official histories, yet they shape how people begin to belong.

Taste archives make room for people to reflect on how food and drink carry memory through sound, gesture, timing, and repetition. In doing so, they extend existing public humanities practices, such as oral history, community cookbooks, and participatory exhibitions, by foregrounding the sensory dimensions of remembering that often remain implicit or unspoken. The value of this approach lies in its modesty. Taste archives are not comprehensive, permanent, or standardized. They are selective, situated, and participatory, shaped by the choices of those whose stories they hold. Their purpose is not to stabilize memory, but to facilitate conversation around it, particularly where experiences of migration, transition, or marginality make continuity feel fragile.

[6] Puig de la Bellacasa 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For public humanities practitioners, taste archives offer a practical and accessible mode of engagement. Food-related conversations can take place in kitchens, hostels, libraries, community centers, or digital spaces, without requiring specialized expertise. They allow memory work to emerge from shared practices rather than institutional authority. The chai outside my college remains a small moment: three strangers, a paper cup, an unfamiliar city. Yet when such moments are gathered and reflected upon across different lives, they begin to outline a public memory of migration that is grounded in everyday experience rather than monumental events.

Aditi Ekka is a PhD scholar (English) at St Joseph's University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Her research explores acculturation, memory, language, and identity among the Catholic Oraon (Adivasi) community in central India, with particular attention to migration, church sociality, and everyday practices of belonging. Working at the intersection of public humanities, sensory studies, and indigenous studies, she examines how memory is produced through food, sound, language, and material culture. Her work draws on oral history and autoethnography to document lived experiences of marginalised communities and to develop participatory approaches to archiving. She is especially interested in community-based memory practices that foreground ordinary rituals and sensory knowledge. Her essay on "taste archives" reflects her broader engagement with public memory, migration, and experimental archival methods within the sensory humanities.

Acknowledgements. The author used AI tools (Perplexity) in a limited capacity to assist with background research and organization; all analysis, interpretation, and writing remain the responsibility of the author.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: A. E.

Funding statement. This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of interest. The author declares no competing interests.

References

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press.

Bower, Anne L., eds. 1997. *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.

Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2nd edn. Sage Publications.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Cite this article: Ekka, Aditi. 2026. "Taste Archives." *Public Humanities,* 2, e15, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10118 Published online by Cambridge University Press