





We've known about the 'fifth taste' for more than 100 years. But it's only now that chefs are beginning to harness its savoury powers to change the way we eat, says **Samuel Muston**



**Flavours to savour:**  
(clockwise from far left) Lea & Perrins sauce; the shrimp burger; an Umami Burger restaurant; soy sauce; umami paste; parmigiano reggiano EPA

ketchup and some Parmesan butter to the Longhorn beef patty. "It has been hit and miss for customers," Turner says. "But if you are open to it, it gives a flavour that is the essence of savouriness."

**A**h yes, that elusive flavour. What is it that gives it what is described in the US as "mouthfulness", by Laura Santtini as "pure deliciousness" and – not altogether helpfully – by the journal *Chemical Science* as the "flavour of boiled crab"? Jeya Henry, professor of human nutrition at Oxford Brookes University, says: "A food that is high in umami is rich in an amino acid called glutamate, one of the building blocks of protein. In high concentrations it makes food very flavoursome. There have been an awful lot of studies to support this. After all, it has been around as a concept in the West for quite some time."

In fact, it dates back to 1907. It was then that the chemistry professor Kikunae Ikeda, of Tokyo Imperial University, noted a taste "common to asparagus, tomatoes, cheese and meat, but which is not one of the four well-known tastes". It was he who first isolated the glutamate (and gave it its name, which is a play on the word *umai*, which loosely translates as *yum* in Japanese). What he

also did, which may account for some residual cynicism, is use this know-how to manufacture it. He invented MSG (monosodium glutamate), which subsequently became a leitmotif for unhealthy, takeaway-style eating in the late 20th century, an all-purpose bogeyman. The charges laid against MSG have included, variously, that it induces headaches, allergies and causes dehydration (together referred to as Chinese Restaurant Syndrome). And in the foodies' hive mind, Umami and MSG were indelibly linked. If then, MSG is a pure expression of umami, in the same way sugar is the classic expression of sweet, should we go easy on it? Is the 200,000 tonnes of MSG made each year actually a danger to our collective health? Should we avoid umami-rich food?

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Not at all, Professor Henry says. "First of all, we should note, Chinese Restaurant

Syndrome has been shown to be something of an old wives' tale," he says. "Numerous big clinical studies have debunked it. You have to understand glutamates have always been with us and part of our diets; you even find them in breast milk. It would be a great pity if anyone missed out on the umami taste because of these residual claims. They're the equivalent of saying the earth is flat: it isn't, and glutamates won't harm you."

Umami, then, has come of age – and things are looking just rosy for it. Where once it was seen as a blight, now it skips around that part of the health spectrum marked "blessing". The reason? It is a handy alternative to salt. Just as a few pinches of sodium can improve a dish, so the well judged addition of a few anchovies or a lump of parmesan can pump up the umami without detracting from the flavour. By playing with the fifth taste we can reduce artery-hardening fat and salt in dishes, without losing out on the flavour.

It is that rare, almost unique thing: something that tastes good and won't make you fat, ill, intoxicated or soporific. So, we may have been too busy listening to Blur or voting New Labour to notice this addition to our palate in the 1990s, but today, with its ascent, there's little excuse not to make hay with this very interesting taste.