

Making Raw Food Taste Better than Cooked!

How Texture Influences Flavor and Appearance in Food

by Cherie Soria



Most people start eating a raw vegan diet because they want to experience improved health and vitality. They don't usually prefer the flavor and texture of raw foods to cooked foods at first—that may come later, after their addiction to the comfort foods of their past has been overcome. But for most of us, flavor, texture, and appearance are primary when making the decision about what to eat. At Living Light Culinary Arts Institute, we are dedicated to making raw foods taste so good that people prefer them—not necessarily for their health or weight-loss value, but because they taste better than cooked and provide the level of comfort and satisfaction people are looking for!

Flavor, texture, and appearance combine together to influence our experience of eating and determine whether it will be an outstanding experience or a mediocre one. Most of us know the importance of flavor and how important it is that the food is attractive and appealing. What many people may not understand is how texture and mouthfeel influence both flavor and appearance.

Mouthfeel refers to the physical and chemical interaction of a food in the mouth. It is not something most of us think about—we either experience pleasure from the texture of the foods we eat, or we don't. We are delighted when food is creamy in contrast to crispy (as in chips and dip), or tender in contrast to crunchy (as in pasta served with baguettes), or hot and cold (as in hot fudge sauce over ice cream). On the other hand, we are disappointed if food is gritty when we expected smooth (as in ice cream), or soggy when we expected crisp (as in crackers), or hard when we expected tender (as in pasta). So, our expectation of mouthfeel has a direct impact on the level of satisfaction we experience.

We evaluate mouthfeel from the initial perception of the food as it enters our mouth, to the first bite, through chewing, and finally as we swallow. Texture influences flavor for

many reasons—some are too complicated to address here, but others can be demonstrated by a few simple tests you can do yourself:

Take a bite of a carrot and note what it feels like as you begin to bite into it. It is hard to start with, and you have to do a fair amount of work to chew it into pieces. In the beginning, the sweetness isn't really prominent. Then, as the juices are released and mixed with your saliva, the starches are broken down into sugars and the carrot becomes sweet and delicious (provided you chew it long enough). Next, try eating some shredded or spiralized carrots. The saliva in your mouth breaks the starches into sugars more quickly—making this form more pleasurable and easier to digest. This is a good reason to chew your food thoroughly!

Along the same lines, think about what you enjoy most about salsa. If you were to put big chunks of tomatoes, onions, garlic, and cilantro in your mouth, it would be a different experience than if the ingredients were finely diced first, so that each bite contains the perfect combination of balanced flavors. Add some pungent spices to counterbalance the sweet coolness of the tomatoes, then contrast these with crunchy tortilla chips served on the side, and you are in raw food heaven!

Think about the foods you love best, especially your favorite cooked foods. What textures and mouthfeel do they possess? How can you duplicate these in similar raw food dishes?

Here are a few tips that may help create the texture and mouthfeel you so enjoy in cooked foods:

- Make sure foods that are supposed to be creamy, crunchy, crispy, tender, etc., truly are!
- Provide textural contrast to the dish or to a companion dish (i.e., smooth and crunchy). For example, add chopped nuts or crispy diced apples to soaked, blended oat or buckwheat groats; top creamy, blended soups with seasoned pumpkin or sunflower seeds; pair crunchy crudité or crackers with dips and patés.

- Include dishes of different textures together in a meal, rather than serving monotextural meals (everything smooth or crunchy, for example). Balance dense or heavier dishes with lighter ones. For example, pair a creamy soup with a crisp salad, and add crunchy crackers.
- Use methods such as marination and massage to tenderize vegetables and give them a familiar, cooked mouthfeel. For example, vigorously massage shredded kale leaves to create a cooked texture. Soften spiralized zucchini noodles by sprinkling them with salt, setting them aside for a few minutes, then rinse and drain them before adding sauce, to create a pasta with a cooked mouthfeel. Or, marinate finely julienned vegetables in a dressing containing salt or tamari and an acid fruit juice; cover and place in a dehydrator for an hour, or leave in the refrigerator overnight, to allow them to soften and take on a cooked texture and appearance.
- Layer diced fruit or vegetables between creamy emulsions, and serve the combination in a glass goblet as a parfait. Top it with something crunchy. For example, serve warm, creamy chocolate or pineapple sauce over frozen sliced bananas or banana ice cream, and top with candied walnuts; or serve a fruit smoothie in a soup bowl with diced fruit and chopped mint and coconut.
- Add finely diced or shaved vegetables to creamy soups. For example, add corn and minced vegetables to a cream soup to make delicious corn chowder or add shaved fennel to a cream of zucchini soup.
- Add a dollop of cream to vegetable or fruit soups. For example, spoon nut or avocado cream over a tomato or spicy papaya soup, then sprinkle with chives. To take the experience to the next level, top with tiny croutons.
- Finish a light soup with a creamy topping and crispy bits. For example, top a thin puréed gazpacho with diced avocados and crunchy dehydrated seeds or croutons.
- Add puréed fruits and vegetables to emulsify and add creaminess. For example, puréed avocados, tomatoes, coconut cream, pine nut cream, and even mango can be added to soups to create a creamier consistency.
- Thicken and emulsify soups, dressings, sauces, and fillings using culinary staples like Irish moss, agar agar, psyllium powder, lecithin, and flax meal. Use kitchen tools and equipment to create a variety of textures. Consider appearance and mouthfeel when you decide which type and size of cut you will use for different ingredients in your recipes. For example, you can cut zucchini into lasagna noodles using a mandoline. You can then julienne those same thin planks lengthwise to create wide “egg” noodles, or crosswise for use in marinated vegetable dishes of all kinds. You can even cut them into grain-size pieces as a substitute for rice!

Become aware of the textures you find most pleasing, and see what you can do to replicate them in the dishes and meals you create. Humans are pleasure-loving beings; therefore, how we feel about our food is important to us. Very few people are satisfied eating the same food day after day or the same textures all the time. Understanding the effects texture, consistency, and mouthfeel have on the pleasure of eating is what separates a good chef from a great one! Take a class at Living Light Culinary Institute to learn more.



Here is a list of some of the types of equipment that can help you create a variety of textures:

Equipment	Use
Knives and mandoline food slicer	Slice, dice, mince, chiffonade (cut long, thin shreds), and julienne.
Spiral or turning slicer	Cut thin ribbons and create delicate pastas.
Food processor	Slice, dice, julienne, mince, shred, grind, purée, and create patés and nut butters.
Blender	Blend, grind, purée, emulsify, cream, and add loft.
Standing mixer	Add loft, whip.
Hand-held shredder or box shredder	Shred.
Juicer	Create beverages, “ice creams,” nut butters, and patés.
Food mill	Process soft foods like tomatoes and berries, and remove skin and seeds.
Dehydrator	Warm casseroles, sauces, and vegetable dishes; marinate and soften vegetables; reduce and thicken sauces; and create firm/crisp/crunchy textures.