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Want to really appreciate your food? A higher price may do the trick

By Mary MacVean

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How does price affect satisfaction at a buffet restaurant? (Getty Images)

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- ❖ Your \$1 lunch might taste better if it costs \$5, researchers say
- ❖ In a study, diners who paid twice as much for their food enjoyed it 11% more
- ❖ "People assume there's a higher price tag on better quality," chef Eric Crowley says

If you could get a \$5 lunch for \$1, would it taste better? Be a more satisfying lunch?

If you chose the bargain, guess again.

Price affects consumer satisfaction, and getting a deal doesn't necessarily make diners like their food better, according to researchers at Cornell University who frequently study human behavior and eating habits.

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People think if something is expensive, it is better.

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- Corina Weibel, chef-owner of the Atwater Village restaurant Canele

“We were fascinated to find that pricing has little impact on how much one eats, but a huge impact on how you interpret the experience,” Brian Wansink, a professor at Cornell's Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, said in a statement.

Just cutting the price “dramatically affects how customers evaluate and appreciate the food,” said Wansink, who

oversaw the research. The study was presented recently at the Experimental Biology conference in San Diego.

The researchers worked with an Italian restaurant they described as high-quality in upstate New York. They gave 139 diners a menu for an all-you-can-eat buffet that cost either \$4 or \$8 for lunch. The customers were asked to evaluate the food and the restaurant, and they were asked to rate on a nine-point scale their first, middle and last bite of food.

The two groups ate the same amount of food. But the people who paid \$8 liked it an average of 11% more, the researchers said.

And the people who paid less more often said they felt like they had overeaten. They liked their food less and less over the course of the meal.

Ozge Sigirci, a researcher at Cornell's Food and Brand Lab who conducted the study, said the results were surprising.

"If the food is there, you are going to eat, but the pricing very much affects how you are going to feel about your meal and how you will evaluate the restaurant," Sigirci said in a statement.

Corina Weibel, the chef-owner of Canele, a restaurant in Atwater Village, said the results were not so surprising.

"People think if something is expensive, it is better," she said Tuesday by phone, and they're not always willing to trust solely their own judgment.

She also suggested the result might change based on diners' backgrounds: People who frequently eat out might be more willing or more able to appreciate the food regardless of the price, she said.

"In some places everyone has an opinion, and then maybe it would be different," she said.

Chef Eric Crowley, owner of Chef Eric's Culinary Classroom in L.A., wondered whether people would feel the same way if presented with two of the same Lexus cars -- one for \$20,000 and one for \$40,000.

"People assume there's a higher price tag on better quality," he said.

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- Brian Wansink, a professor at Cornell's Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management

The researchers looked at a buffet where diners could take as much food as they wanted, and while the study did not address any public health implications of that restaurant style, it might provide some lessons, the researchers said.

"If you're a consumer and want to eat at a buffet, the best thing to do is eat at the most expensive buffet you can afford," to have the

best experience, Wansink suggested.

Weibel also said she doesn't think the study means people don't like a bargain. People she meets, she said, are always asking whether Canele is on the discount site Groupon.