

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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familycourtguy@gmail.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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TASTE INFLATION

Why We Can Never Have Enough

Whenever excess resources are available to an individual or group, the surplus will eventually be absorbed by their insistence on ever-finer degrees of perceived quality.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

People who are wealthy never see themselves that way. In their eyes, they never have enough. They can earn ten times the average local income and still have trouble paying their bills. In fact, it seems that everyone at every income level experiences the same stress over money. Why is this?

Taste inflation.

I have coined this term to try to describe a phenomenon I see throughout society: Greater resources don't usually result in greater happiness. On the contrary, they often set people up for a tragic collapse later on. There seems to be a hidden psychological process that neutralizes excess resources, so when people look at the freedom they actually have they never seem any richer.

Taste inflation means that whenever you have excess resources at your disposal, your tastes will naturally expand to absorb those resources. You will seek ever-finer degrees of perceived quality in the things you buy and do, and you are willing to pay an ever-higher price for them, until the limit of your resources is reached and you can do it no more.

Take drink. The simplest drink is tap water. It replenishes your bodily fluids, and it's free. If you can't afford anything else, that's what you'll drink, and your body will be satisfied with it.

If you have more money, though, you'll probably want bottled water or a flavored beverage, and your taste in these drinks is likely to expand with the money you have available. Is a generic bottle of filtered water enough, or do you need water from a romantic-sounding spring in the mountains? If you can afford the designer water, you'll probably buy it.

Maybe you go for wine instead, but if you have the money, the cheapest brand won't do. It has to have the right vintage, bouquet and rating. In wine, the perceived gradations of quality are indeed infinite. You can spend thousands of dollars on a bottle—and people do!

This expansion of tastes seems to be a natural human process across all cultures and social circumstances. I can't tell you exactly why it happens, but it does. It happens to sheiks who are suddenly blessed with huge oil wealth and must build ever-bigger palaces. It happens to teenagers who always insist on the most expensive fashions their parents can afford. If someone gets a pay raise, sure enough he's out buying a bigger house.

The natural consumer trend is always toward the bigger, fancier and more expensive. Our economy is driven by it and aggressively encourages it. The relentless commercial message is always to upgrade from what you have now to something supposedly "better."

If resources are available, any product once seen as a luxury quickly becomes a necessity. That's why rich people never feel rich. They commit themselves to bigger homes, more costly possessions and higher fashion standards until they don't have any perceived discretion left.

Typically, the process only ends when people reach the limits of their resources and simply can't afford any further taste expansion. Sadly, instead of the process simply stopping, it often reverses in a painful crash, as people commit themselves to products and lifestyles they can't afford in the long run.

Once you depart from true need (the glass of tap water), "quality" is subjective. If a better quality product doesn't exist, merchants will invent it for you. That's what occupies the vast bulk of our advertizing space: invented quality. You don't just need a car; you need a luxury car with a whole range of features you probably won't use. The person selling you the supposed quality always has selfish motives in doing so—either profit or the confirmation of his own emotional investments.

It's so easy to fall into the taste trap. It happens to all of us. Bigger, better, more—that's what everyone is always selling us, until we realize bigger isn't always better and our actual need was lost somewhere along the way.

—G.C.

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