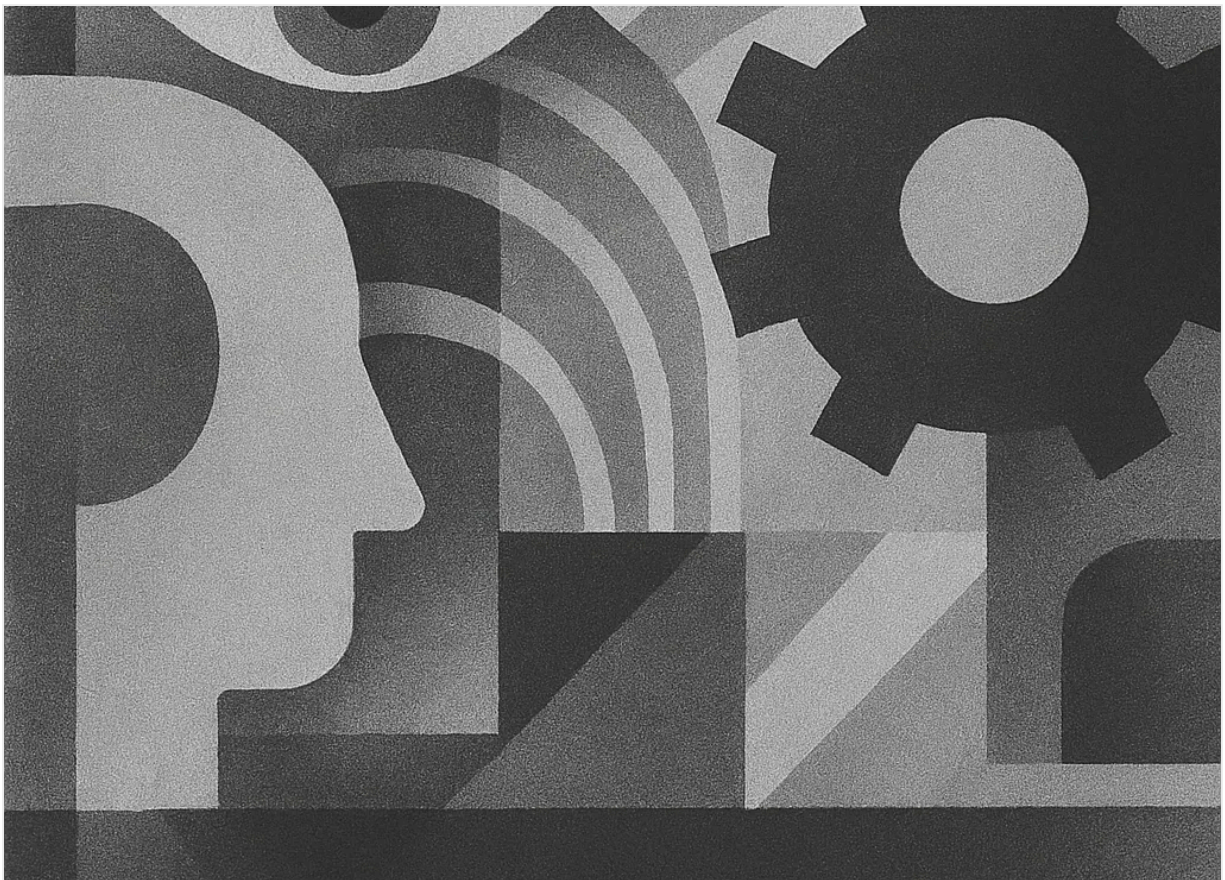


Culture

Taste in the Age of Machines

AI can generate infinite content, but it can't decide what should exist. Taste, built through exposure, discernment, and intent, is the real edge in the AI age.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ January 15, 2026 ■



If you've been listening to your favorite influencer, you've probably heard the gospel: "taste" will be the biggest differentiator in the AI era. LLMs can now write, draw, and compose with minimal prompting,

but what they produce often feels lifeless. “Slop,” as the internet calls it. Taste, supposedly, is the antidote.

The general sentiment is directionally correct. In a world where everyone has outsourced thinking and production to machines, those who take back the means of production and infuse real taste into what they make will stand out. If we’re being slightly religious about it, we might say the tasteful shall inherit the earth.

But before we can talk about cultivating taste, we need to understand what it actually is. Taste (a.k.a. “aesthetic taste”) is the ability to judge the aesthetic value of an object. It is defined by heightened sensitivity to beauty, form, structure, and harmony in the things we see and in the world around us. Taste is deeply personal, influenced by individual perceptions, backgrounds, and experiences, and yet remains universally influential in the human experience.

People talk about “taste” as if it’s a gift, a talent that some people are born with. But this is not entirely correct. Taste can and is often cultivated through experience, exposure to different media and art forms, and conscious effort. As your experience broadens, your ability to make nuanced aesthetic judgments becomes more refined.

Taste is heavily influenced by what (and how much) you consume. People who’ve seen more of the world (music, art, writing, design, film, even code) develop a mental library that lets them distinguish the good from the bad. More importantly, their own creations tend to be better on average, often because they’re drawing from a broader range of influences and mixing them in new ways.

Nowhere is this clearer than in music. Think about Dr. Dre. One of his most iconic beats came from sampling *The Edge*, an obscure 1960s jazz track by David McCallum. You don't "luck" into brilliance like that—you get there by listening widely and being obsessive about what you listen to. Dre likely reviewed hundreds of songs before choosing the one he sampled for *The Next Episode*. That kind of taste comes from an almost pathological curiosity about sound.

This pattern (relentless exposure followed by recombination) is universal. It's what people mean when they say everything is a remix. There are hardly any truly new ideas or creations. Whatever you make, you're building on what came before. The people who do this best are the ones who've absorbed the old stuff deeply enough to know what to borrow, what to discard, and how to remix it into something fresh.

The same principle applies far beyond music. The best writers are almost always the most voracious readers. That's how they can tell good prose from bad, often from first principles rather than from a manual like *The Elements of Style*. It's also how they learn what to select and remix from earlier work. You can't stand on the shoulders of giants if you haven't done the work to climb up there in the first place. Taste is the strength you build by "lifting" all the art that came before you.

Similarly, the best filmmakers are cinephiles first. Ask them about their favorite movies, and you'll see their taste immediately. They'll name the movies they loved—the films that inspired them to become directors. They also borrow inspiration from the old masters and weave these influences into new films that keep cinema alive. In another timeline, some of these directors might have become critics, given how deeply they understand what makes a film work and how keenly they see its flaws and positives.

The same feedback loop of exposure, pattern recognition, and refinement shows up even in sports. Kobe Bryant perfected the fadeaway shot and made it more graceful than Michael Jordan ever did. Beyond raw talent, Bryant benefited from years of watching tape, noticing subtle patterns across eras and players, and mixing those influences into something new and unique. His edge was perceptual sharpness, honed over years of obsessive study, that went beyond pure physical skill. That's what allowed him to see things other players missed and make impossible, highlight-worthy shots every night he stepped out on the court.



Notice any similarities?

Across every domain, the story repeats: taste is the ability to see and recognize patterns invisible to others because you've seen so much before. It's less about genius and more about the accumulation of

intuitions that compound into instinct and discernment.

Of course, there's a catch: developing that kind of discernment takes stamina. No one likes poorly made art, but to develop taste, you have to expose yourself to the bad stuff, too. You can't know what's good without contrasting it to something else. The grind of sitting through mediocrity is what refines your sense of what works and what doesn't.

The infinite slop machine

There's a subtle misunderstanding that degrades the discourse around taste in the AI era: many assume "human" = "tasteful" and "AI" = "slop". That's wrong. The average LLM actually has *more* taste than the average person, largely because it has been exposed to vastly more material. It recognizes structure and style better than most people do. Prompted well, it will outwrite, outproduce, and outcode the median human easily.

This cognitive error stems from a lack of understanding of what "slop" really means. *Slop* doesn't mean "AI-made." Slop means *generic*. Slop is the output of a process designed to scale production while minimizing differentiation. Fast food is slop because it's engineered for the lowest common denominator. A Michelin-star meal isn't, because it reflects a chef's intent, has variety, and involves creative risk. Human creativity emerges when we break the template, when we add *something else* that wasn't in the recipe.

"AI slop" fatigue feels visceral because the outputs are so similar and undifferentiated. Humans crave variety, which is why your minds start to rebel after seeing a thousand nearly identical outputs. It's like eating the same cookie every day until you want to throw up. Some people are more sensitive to that sameness and feel their "Spidey sense" tingling

when exposed to mass-produced slop. Others, especially those low in openness to experience, hardly mind. They'll happily consume the same cookie forever.



Slop is the famine of abundance: near-infinite output leaves us starved of meaning, joy, and nourishment.

It is important to note that slop predates AI. We've been making slop art, music, literature, and design long before LLMs showed up. Wherever repetition dominates and predictability pays, creativity declines, and the slop output follows.

Take music, for example. Thousands of people go to college to learn the rules for making it. They study chords, progressions, instrumentation, structure—everything required to produce something that sounds “pleasant.” But learning fundamentals and writing your own song doesn't automatically mean you have taste. You can know what good music is, you can recognize bad music, and *still* produce something forgettable.

If your song follows a strict formula and sounds like anything anyone else could have written, it's undifferentiated slop. It has no individuality, no presence, no variety. It's the kind of track you can play as background ambience without provoking emotion—acceptable if that's the intent, but lifeless otherwise. It might appeal to the masses, but that's only because they've never learned to appreciate anything else. You're making slop.

The same holds for film. Consider the stereotypical *popcorn movie* (a film engineered for mass appeal). The average popcorn movie is light, entertaining, and formulaic: the story is predictable (e.g., good triumphs over evil), the characters are predictable, and the dialogue is predictable. Everything about it feels like it rolled off a conveyor belt built for “content.” The movie ticks off the right boxes but leaves no emotional impact. That's slop.

You can notice when slop pervades the real world, too. To illustrate, every basketball player learns the fundamentals (dribbling, passing, shooting), but only the greats add their own flavor. Jordan had his mid-range jumper, Olajuwon had his dream shake, Curry had his logo three, and Shaq had his powerful dunk. Each of those moves broke the rulebook and gave the player a signature. That signature is taste in movement—the thing that separates stars from sound but forgettable players. No one watches the NBA for “fundamental basketball”; we watch for the flair.

Across every field, the pattern repeats. You can follow the rules and produce passable output...or you can depart from the template and make something distinct. Taste is what lets you push to the margins, break form, and inject your own sensibility into the mix. LLMs may flood the

world with technically adequate content, but only the tasteful—those willing to suffer through slop, learn its limits, and then exceed them—will produce work that actually moves people.

So you want to develop taste

There are really only two ways to have taste: (a) Be born with it, or (b) Develop it. Does (a) contradict everything we've said so far about the origins of taste? Not really. Some people are indeed born with a heightened sensitivity, an inborn ability to perceive beauty, form, and structure with unusual clarity. These people often show latent ability that manifests without extensive practice.

Mozart is the classic example. The grandmasters of classical music often reached their prime later in life, as years of practice compounded into mastery. But Mozart was a *wunderkind*—a prodigy whose grasp of musical taste and form appeared early. He didn't need to write a thousand operas to know what a good one sounded like. His ear was already tuned to the differences between good and bad music. Mozart was *born* with taste.

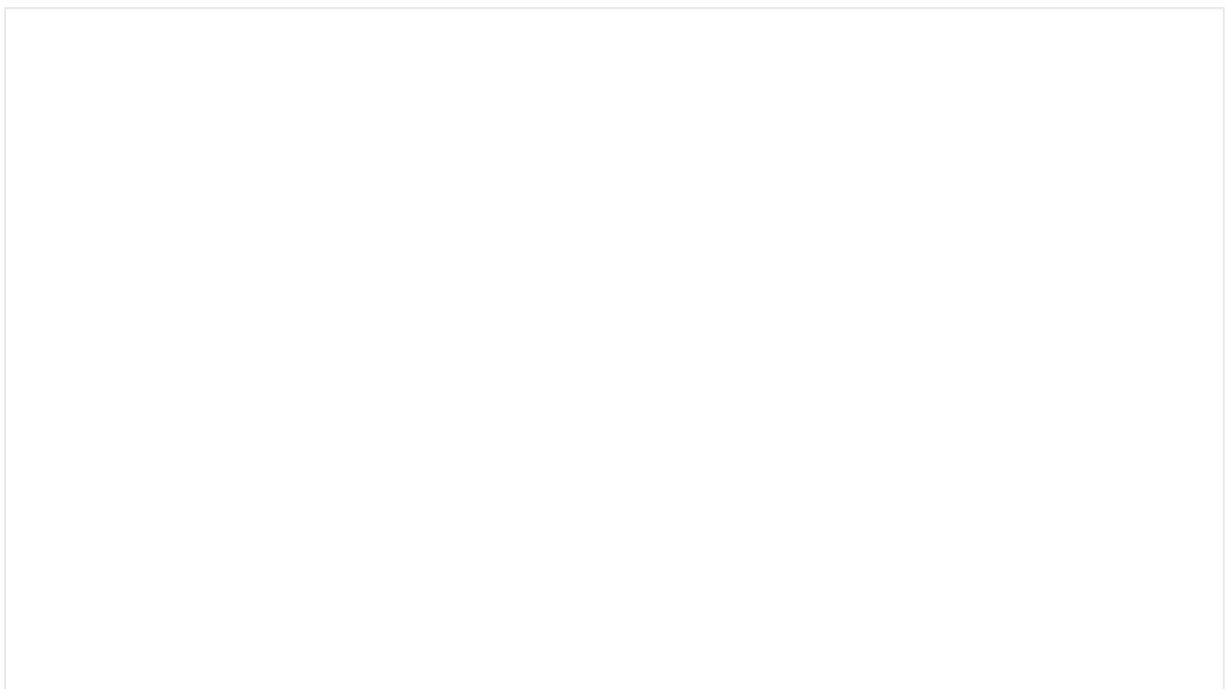
But we are not all Mozart. For the rest of us mere humans, taste is something we cultivate. You do need some baseline qualities to develop taste, chiefly an attraction to quality and a curiosity about what makes things good. You must be able to pause to understand what you're consuming and why you like it.

Curiosity takes effort, which turns off most people and ensures they'll consume slop mindlessly. While people intent on developing taste optimize for curiosity, the rest optimize for convenience. They watch

whatever's recommended, listen to whatever's trending, and eat whatever's nearby. Having to think about whether their consumption habits are good or bad feels like too much work.

Developing taste requires a different kind of consumption, one driven by curiosity rather than convenience. You go on little voyages of discovery: reading beyond bestseller lists, listening to random songs from niche artists, and watching films that catch your attention, not just those critics (or streaming services) recommend. You build your own mental map of what feels rich, surprising, or alive and develop your own heuristics for judging quality.

As mentioned earlier, you have to consume both the good and the bad before you can tell them apart. You can't outsource that process. You can't let Spotify, Netflix, or *The New York Times* decide for you. Build your own playlists. Pick your own books. Choose your own films. Taste emerges from asserting independence and agency, from putting your twist on the cookie recipe.



Go beyond the airport bookstore!

But what if you don't have the time? What if you can't spend weekends in galleries, concerts, and theaters? What if you're another 4HLer trying to make ends meet and have little time to spare for side quests? Then you must learn to study and notice everything around you.

Get better at studying what makes good things *good*. If you can't consume endlessly, pay deeper attention to what you do consume. You don't always have to sift through every rock before knowing what a diamond is—you can also train yourself to recognize a diamond when you see one.

Not everyone will master the rules of every craft or develop a critic's vocabulary. But everyone can notice. When someone says a house is beautiful because of its arches, look at the arches yourself. See how they're designed. Notice how they make you feel. Observe what they make you think.

Do this with every product, work of art, or creation that seems to radiate taste. Ask yourself: Does it leave me inspired and wanting to create something myself? Does it reveal the depths of human creativity? Does it show beauty in form and symmetry? What did the creator do to trigger this response?

Opening your senses—really opening them—is difficult, but necessary. Pay attention. Study what moves you. Learn to see and feel at a higher resolution. You might glimpse what makes the best things so special, and the extra sauce that gives them their beauty.

The tasteful shall inherit the post-AGI earth

In the end, taste isn't about status or sophistication. It's about learning to see the world in higher resolution. The closer you look, the more patterns you begin to recognize, and the more you realize how few people are truly looking at all. Most drift from one recommendation to the next, consuming whatever is placed in front of them. The tasteful, by contrast, are deliberate. They pause, study, and notice the world around them in high fidelity.

That's what taste really is: an evolved form of noticing—the ability to pay attention long enough to separate what merely exists from what deserves to exist by merit of its beauty. It's less about having “good opinions” and more about developing an inner tuning fork that vibrates when you encounter something **beautiful, coherent, and emotionally resonant**.

As AI automates competence, human sensitivity will matter more than ever. Machines can generate infinite output, but they can't decide what should exist and why. They can predict style but not significance; they can imitate taste but never embody it. The future won't belong to those who merely produce, but to those who discern—the ones who can look at an endless sea of options and know what needs to be added, removed, or remixed.