

# WORLD-RENOWNED SENSORY-CONSUMER SCIENTIST

## appointed extraordinary professor at UP

Prominent scientist Professor Hely Tuorila, professor emeritus at the University of Helsinki in Finland, has been appointed an extraordinary professor in the University of Pretoria's (UP) Department of Consumer and Food Sciences.

The widely published academic is an expert in sensory-consumer research of foods. Her research interests include consumer response to unfamiliar and nutritionally significant foods, and genetic and cognitive influences on food acceptance.

"Sensory-consumer scientists aim to understand the drivers and constraints that lead to food acceptance and choices," she explains. "For example, the integration of novel food products into an individual's diet is a complex process that is guided by exposures to foods from early childhood, but also by an inherent personality trait, food neophobia [the extreme or irrational fear or dislike of anything new or unfamiliar] and by the surrounding culture. Here, the individual trait food neophobia sets a threshold to try to accept any unfamiliar food."

Scientists try to pinpoint the most important attributes of each food that appeals to different consumer groups. "This is done through laboratory tests in which voluntary participants rate food samples for flavour and other sensory properties, and through surveys that define individual readiness to accept novel, emotionally or health-wise important products."

In terms of food security, sensory-consumer research can help to develop acceptable products from affordable, nutritionally adequate, locally available, under-utilised or completely novel ingredients, while also considering the

expectations and mental constraints that might restrict the acceptance.

"The African food market is rapidly changing, especially in urban centres," says Prof Riëtte de Kock, associate professor in UP's Department of Consumer and Food Sciences, and a leading sensory scientist. "Lifestyles are changing, with shifts in food consumption patterns moving away from nutrient-rich traditional foods to diets high in dietary energy, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Development of scientifically based instruments to characterise African food users could help in guiding the design of acceptable food product innovations. Prof Tuorila's experience as professor and researcher in this area is of tremendous value."

Prof Tuorila will assist with mentoring sensory-consumer scientists who are part of the recently established African Network for Sensory Evaluation Research (ANSWER); guiding postgraduate students in their scientific publishing activities; consumer research in the European Union-funded Food Systems Africa InnoFoodAfrica project, in which the universities of Pretoria and Helsinki are partners.

"I am highly motivated to contribute to the research programme that Professor de Kock and her colleagues have set up," says Prof Tuorila. She enjoys interacting with postgraduate students from various African regions to obtain high-level research training at UP.



"Proper education of such individuals is of strategic importance for Africa," says Prof Tuorila. "Food acceptance in Africa contains scientifically unexplored elements that deserve attention, such as responses to foods by the younger, urbanised populations who are often short of financial resources. Understanding their position also has an important health and well-being dimension."

In 2019, Prof Tuorila supported a research programme to develop instruments to segment food users in South Africa, Lesotho and Botswana in order to structure and apply health intervention strategies and new product developments. Workshops with regular consumers and experts in nutrition, science and trade in these countries revealed the rapid change of food cultures.

"By understanding the factors that drive consumers' food choices and preferences, researchers and developers are better able to design acceptable food product options," she says.

**For more information, go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)**