

Is all this processed food a gigantic can of worms?

Business and Society
Review Fall, 1980 → NOTE
DATE

What Corporations Have Done to Our Food

by JOAN GUSSOW

IN THIS "land of the Cluett/Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint/Girl With the Wrigley Eyes . . . / land above all of Just add Hot Water and Serve," the problem is abundance. While much of the world struggles with scarcity, the American experience, anthropologist Margaret Mead was fond of pointing out, is of having to refuse food. "Please, no more, I'm stuffed"; "Just a tiny piece"; "Oh, what a wicked dessert." We have even designed a kind of Dorian Gray approach to gluttony. For we have invented foods—diet soft drinks, calorie-free cookies, bread diluted with wood pulp—that enable us to continue our excessive consumption without increasing our tendency to overweight.

Perhaps the most obvious effect of this food excess is that it makes other people's hunger hard to believe. Faced with the temptations of those brightly lit aisles, those floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with Pop-Tarts, Kool Aid, Cap'n Crunch, and Screaming Yellow Zonkers, it is hard to remember that in much of the world millions are thankful for one real meal a day. There each day's meal is very much like that of the day before, perhaps a portion of grain or starchy tuber, seasoned with vegetables and perhaps a scrap of chicken or fish.

No unsweetened pineapple chunks in rows of identical cans; no foil-wrapped arrays of margarines, distinguishable from one another only by their imaginative names and their precise levels of polyunsaturates; no Flintstones Yabba Dabba Dew Orange Drink, no Hi-C Dairy Fresh Red Punch (red punch? dairy fresh?); no arrays of breakfast cereals—"Norman," "Frute Brute," "Grins & Smiles & Giggles & Laughs"—dazzlingly flavored and colored to appeal to a newly emergent "child market"; no textured vegetable protein rendered into mock bacon and sausage products (what the British call "knitted meats") designed to assuage the anxieties of the fat-avoiders and cholesterol-phobes.

In the last decade, the American food supply of which these products are a part has come under increasing attack from critics who find it tasteless and absurd and who accuse it of being

both killingly unhealthy to us and immorally wasteful and exploitative to the rest of the world. They point to the increasing burden of additives—intentional and accidental—that our food carries, to the difficulties of ensuring safety and nutritive integrity, and the problem of consumer confusion in a food marketplace with more than 10,000 items.

The defenders of the American way of eating call these charges alarmist, observing that there is no other place in the world where consumers have such choice and abundance. They defend processing on the grounds that it preserves and makes palatable food which would otherwise be wasted. They point with pride to the range of choices, the consistency of texture, and taste of the food products available from coast to coast. They celebrate the presence of fresh summer vegetables in the mid-winter midwestern market, asserting that the glad outcomes of industry ef-

forts are cheap high-quality food and the opportunity to buy anything one could dream of wanting to eat.

The controversy is long standing, but through the years the public arguments have continued to shed less light than heat on what is at issue. Consider, for example, a series of "consumer information" ads that General Foods ran toward the end of the 1970s. The company pointed out that (1) lemons contained natural preservatives; (2) many "additives" were natural; and (3) the principal purpose of processing was to make food "easier to use, or better tasting, or longer lasting, or safer, or whatever." In one of their ads, GF even went so far as to present a poetic and spirited defense of the frozen pea.

There are few critics—even those most intemperate in their attacks on the American food supply—to whom the freezing of a green pea, picked at the peak of its freshness, would seem a reprehensible or unnatural act. For the argument between defenders and attackers of the food supply in the last decades has not been waged over the attributes of canned applesauce and frozen peas, nor over the creator's choice of a preservative in lemons, but over the utility and safety of thou-

sands of "food novelties" like instant black iced-coffee mix and frozen no-egg omelettes.

GF's defense of the green pea tended to obscure the real problem, which indeed was hinted at in some of the company's own ad copy: "Nobody makes food, peas included, the way nature does." This is an undeniable truth. But for economic reasons that are well worth examining, an increasing number of companies appear to be trying to produce convincing facsimiles. Before our very eyes, food is disappearing. Butter is replaced by margarine, which is then supplanted by imitation margarine. Puddings made at home by mother from milk and eggs are replaced by puddings made from a box by adding milk, and these are replaced by pudding-like plastics which come in slightly harder plastic containers in "your dairy case."

THE LIMITS OF FATNESS

Why is this happening to food? Have the food companies simply been wicked in corrupting the innocence of our food? A better explanation is that the companies are merely businesses, dealing in a commodity which, as English nutritionist John Yudkin long ago pointed out, is unique in being consumable only within narrow limits, "below which life cannot exist and above which even the most gluttonous cannot reach." Food can be dressed up or down, made complex or simple, but there are rather strict limits beyond which it cannot be eaten.

The chronic problem of the food industry is the inability of anyone to consume much more than 1,500 pounds of food a year. If the popula-

"I have no idea what my public image is and would rather not, you know. 'Cause I got my feet firmly planted in the cheese-burgers."

—David Crosby
rock star

tion is growing rapidly, then food industry growth can continue at a reasonable pace. When population growth slows, as it has done in the United States, other approaches must be tried. It becomes necessary to induce the consumer to pay more and more for the same quantity of raw materials. This accounts for the long-standing importance of the new product and the new product line to the economic health of the U.S. food industry. The effort invested in new product development is extraordinary. Moreover, processing and more processing, and lately more diversification, are the ways in which the food industry has produced growth in a product category which would normally expand no faster than the already overweight population.

In addition, when the prices of the raw materials go up as they did in the 1970s, there is great pressure to protect profits by producing "food" products which do not rely heavily on "food" materials. This is precisely what Arthur D. Little, Inc. recommended to the Food and Agribusiness Industries in the wake of the energy crunch in May 1974. The consulting firm recommended:

"One strategy for weathering times of shortage and high prices is development of products with relatively complex formulations and/or high value-added, such as convenience foods. Standard low-value-added-food-products—quasi-commodities—are not easily reformulated without loss of identity. Moreover, their profit margins are generally not large enough to cushion rises in raw material costs. Processors of more complex food products have a much greater latitude in the raw material selection process. . . . The further a product's identity moves from a specific raw material—that is, the more processing steps involved—the less vulnerable is its processor."

It might not have been hard to predict that among the new products of the seventies would be Hamburger Helper—a relatively high-priced box of pasta, seasonings, and additives originally "positioned" as a "skillet dinner" and subsequently "repositioned" as a source of casserole dinners as well. And then there were Pringles, the virtually immortal potato snack that was no longer dependent, for its existence or its price, on the fresh potato.

It might have been easy to predict that when sugar prices dropped, novelty cereals for children would be big again—since they contain less of the valuable grain raw material than "adult cereals," but they command a premium price. However, it might have been too absurd to imagine a product like French Toast Batter Mix in which the customer, using her bowl, her milk, her bread and her frying pan, replaces the "inconvenience" of beating a couple of eggs into the milk with the "convenience" of beating in the contents of a 25-cent packet of "sugar, whey solids, wheat flour, whole egg solids, tapioca, starch, dextrose, hydrogenated vegetable oil, salt, baking power, lactose and artificial color."

These increasing levels of pre-preparation and minor product differentiation which characterize the U.S. food supply appear to be basic components of the food company success formula. Innovation and novelty are viewed as essential by food companies which wish to present an attractive profit picture to their stockholders. Do American consumers profit from the variety which this adds to the marketplace? Industry partisans argue that they do. Food lovers and some nutritionists tend to disagree.

If processing has removed the natural odors and flavors from foods, progress has also supplied their replacement in the form of synthetics. Numerous authors have chronicled the dazzling feats

of the flavorists who create their imitations with nothing more than a few chemicals and well-trained tongues and noses. From the flavorists' standpoint, as Ruth Rosenbaum pointed out several years ago in *New Times*, things are getting better all the time. Advertisements for flavors that run in magazines like *Food Product Development* and *Food Technology* have gone from what Rosenbaum calls "modest imitation" (flavors that are "no match for Mother Nature") to outright hostility to the natural. She cites an annual report from International Fragrances and Flavors which warned its stockholders that natural foods were "a wild mixture of substances created by plants and organisms for completely different nonfood purposes—their survival and reproduction," which "came to be consumed by humans at their own risk." In short, beware of the broccoli, for its function is to flower.

Though synthetic flavors seem designed mainly to repair the overt damage that processing does to flavor, they are very often defended because of their potential contribution to feeding the world's poor. There will never be enough conventional food to meet our requirements, the argument goes; thus we must begin using novel substances which we can flavor to taste like the foods people are used to eating. While the flavorists may at the moment rhapsodize over the "perfect" raspberry flavor which will enhance a calorie-free soft drink, they argue that in the future only they can make Soylent Green taste like steak. However, such arguments tend to break apart against the rocky reality of a world where energy and other resources are increasing in cost. Given the necessary inputs of water, fertilizer, and energy (even algae must be fed), most magical solutions turn out to produce food too expensive for the world's hungry poor to buy.

Highly processed foods are not really cheap; they cannot be, for someone has to pay for the processing. French Toast Batter Mix costs more and provides less food values than the eggs it presumes to replace, and it is convenient only to a consumer who does not know how to cook. Ten years of research and over \$70 million went into Procter & Gamble's attempt to capture, with Pringles, a sizable chunk of the giant, fragmented, but highly profitable potato chip market. If the company had been successful, it would have paved the way for national distribution and, hence, oligopolistic control of yet one more segment of the food market. Unlike conventional potato chips which—being bulky, breakable, irregular, and perishable—must be produced and distributed within a relatively small area, these paraboloid potato corpses were compact, durable, uniform, and virtually immortal. Given consumer resistance to Pringles' disappointing flavor and high price, it is hard to argue that the product was designed to meet consumer needs, wants, or even whims. Rather, this was clearly a product designed to meet urgent corporate needs.

It could be argued that the various baroque outcroppings of our food supply are merely silly, the extravagant price we pay for our abundance. Perhaps a culture which prefers Cool Whip to whipped cream (because Cool Whip is more durable) is merely pointless in its excesses—not harmful, but amusing. But there are a number of critics who disagree. Many of those concerned with the relationship between diet and health have noted that in moving away from foods to food products, we have done much more than permit the continued growth of the food companies. We have changed the nutrient composition of our diets in a way that appears to be related to our increasing vulnerability to degenerative disease; we have raised the levels of sugar, salt, and fat we consume, while eating fewer and fewer complex carbohydrates, fruits, and vegetables.

In addition, as has been pointed out more than once, the technologizing of our food supply has impacted more than just our diets. The far-flung food system which supplies us with products from around the world alters lifestyles in those lands as well as in our own. As food technologist

Magnus Pyke pointed out long ago, it is not a compliment to call a country a Banana Republic.

And with the further industrialization not only of food growing, but also of food preparation, we have imposed dehumanization on ourselves. The production and preparation of food used to be the activities about which much of human life was focused. We have moved away from that. That we no longer understand how food grows, what it takes to grow it, or how dependent we are on the skills of farmers bodes ill for our future plenty. That we no longer understand the importance of breaking real bread together may bode equally ill for our future ability to live to-

gether. It cannot be said better than Phillip Wylie said it a quarter of a century ago:

"Of course all this scientific 'food handling' tends to save money. It certainly preserves food longer. It reduces work at home. But these facts, and especially the last, imply that the first purpose of living is to avoid work—at home anyhow. Without thinking, we are making an important confession about ourselves as a nation.

"We are abandoning quality—even to the quality of people. The 'best' is becoming too good for us. We are suckling ourselves on machine-made mediocrity. It is bad for our souls, our minds, and our digestion. It is the way our wiser and calmer forebears fed, not people, but hogs; as much as possible and as fast as possible, with no standard of quality."

In 1980 "all this scientific food handling" doesn't even tend to save money. The "less" we have settled for has begun to cost us dearly. □