

Food:

SIMPLE SNACKS, CRIMINAL “COOKING” AND THE CAT’S DINNER

by Peter Skinner

America’s love affair with food has fleshed out to health-threatening obesity—and with unthinking generosity, we include our pets in the feast, unaware of the risks they face. The three books considered here may incline readers to some health-preserving thought about diet in general.

In **Crunch! A History of the Great American Potato Chip** (Terrace Books/University of Wisconsin Press, 978-0-299-22770-8), Dirk Burhans (a past publisher of *Greasy Spoon* magazine) recounts the transformation of a seventy-percent water-filled slice of potato into a crisp, near-irresistible taste-teaser. Though now found nationwide in every style and flavor, bearing the labels of giant food companies or local “old-style” producers, the potato chip’s rise has not been plain sailing. “The snack aisles are littered with bodies and blood,” notes one industry executive; another comments, “You have never seen anything like it. This area’s like no other in the world.”

Burhans prefaces his lively account of the chip’s invention (dated to 1853 in Saratoga Springs, NY) with a consideration of the never-guaranteed perfect potato; ring rot, sunscald, vascular browning, late blight, and tuber rot are among “can’t use” conditions. He presents the pioneers (Messrs Wise and Lay among them), the corporate take-overs, and the antitrust concerns that followed the Frito-Lay merger. Burhans’ “Fats, Carbs, and Calories” chapter, which includes “The Arthritis Connection” and “Acrylamide Scare,” is an eye-opener for the health-and-diet conscious. Interviews, illustrations, and solid sources make this book a meal, not a snack.

In **Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud, from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee** (Princeton University Press, 978-0-691-13820-6), Bee Wilson, a prize-winning British food-

writer, pitches the reader into a brilliantly lit supermarket of stomach-turning information about the adulteration of basic foodstuffs. Despite historical asides (check “pepperers” and “garblers”), her focus is on food corruption and corrective legislation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It’s a horrific story: not just the basics such as bread, milk, and meat came with bulking-up or spoilage-hiding additives, but coffee, wine, and even mustard were doctored for flavor and bulk.

America takes center stage with the introduction of margarine in the 1880s, an event which led to wars with butter producers and run-ins with protection-minded state legislatures. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 book *The Jungle*, a scaring denunciation of the beef industry, fired up pure-food/clean-food campaigns that have since kept producers and critics at loggerheads.

Wilson zestfully reports on scandals, outcries, high-profile food corrupters, and crusaders (some themselves dealt in less detectable adulterants), recording the ever-lagging legislation that brought some safety to much of the basic food supply. She ends on a cautionary note about contemporary food (produce, meats, and drinks) whose growth and production conditions are in themselves dangerous. The near impossibility of comprehensive, enforceable legislation, and effective policing becomes clear: adulteration can be subtle; the public unsuspecting, and the producers’ rewards great.

Bee Wilson has written and impressive and important book, though some readers may find the feast too rich, preferring less content and more rigorous organization.

Those with an appetite for more will welcome **Pet Food Politics** (University of California, 978-0-520-25781-8). Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition and sociology at New York University and a veteran writer on food and the public interest, has produced a compelling anal-

ysis of a recent tainted food scandal that reveals how the profit-hungry industry works—and works against the consumer because of the sheer complexity of production involving numerous suppliers based abroad, well-distanced from the American market place.

In early 2007, owners’ calls to Menu Foods about their sick cats led management to suspect the wheat gluten used in the product. Subsequently, the firm recalled 60 million cans (a mere one percent of all cat food in the market place at the time). An FDA enquiry followed. Laboratory tests established that the additive melamine (a source of dietary nitrogen) in the wheat gluten was the culprit. But there is no simple “end of story.” Nestle reveals a problem of global proportions. The basic ingredients of pet foods and its additives usually originate abroad (often in China), where controls and inspections are inadequate. The “food” with its dubious or dangerous content then enters the household pet, farm animal, and other foodstuffs markets. Hunger for profit militates against consumer protection; recalls are only belatedly initiated. The FDA is clearly understaffed; any scare (take, for example, mad cow disease) shakes consumer confidence and roils markets—but seldom guarantees long-term improvement.

This well-structured book with its chronologies of food-safety problems and diagrams of their effects is a frightening wake-up call. Already the tainted baby milk tragedy is upon us. **F**

Peter Skinner is a regular contributor to ForeWord. He was born and educated in England, and came to New York with a degree in European history from Oxford University. In America, he has taught and worked in PR and corporate communications, and has always been involved in editing, reviewing, writing, and text-doctoring. Peter is the author of World Trade Center, a book on 9/11 that sold over a million copies in twelve languages.