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WHAT'S IN A SNACK?

Food and Chance: New ways to make modern food less predictable

For much of human history eating and drinking was a chancy affair, and not only in terms of availability, such as the risk of famine that continues to afflict parts of the world. Rather, the food we had could be inherently dangerous, a potential source of disease. The sense of food currently enjoyed in the Western world – secure, knowable, regulated, consistent, safe – is relatively recent, though some of our earliest culinary processes were as much about ensuring safety as imparting pleasure. Beer and tea, for example, took the chance out of drinking water by killing micro-organisms that would not survive brewing or boiling.

Safety

Industrialization and legislation have done a great deal to shape the landscape of contemporary food. The mass production (Levenstein, 2003) of branded items like Heinz beans, Big Macs and Mars bars ensures a sameness of consumer experience: what Allison James characterises as the 'homogenizing of food across the globe' (James, 2005: 378). Improvements in refrigeration, post-harvest technology, and advances in packaging and transport prolong freshness, while national government agencies, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Britain's Food Standards Agency, work to ensure the safety of what we ingest. Furthermore, there is evidently a consensus that it is insufficient for 'experts' to know about what's in our food, that consumers must be told too. So packaging information breaks down the constituent elements of a product, its place in a balanced diet, and, to an ever-growing extent, details other aspects of its provenance in laboured detail. A welter of small print, symbols and guidance – what Barrientos and Dolan call a 'barrage of slogans, labels and schemes' (2006: 2) now adorns much of what we eat, providing a multi-faceted 'assurance'.

Our horror when these systems and associated expectations are subverted – e.g. the 2013 horsemeat scandal in which equine and other prohibited flesh was covertly included in processed meat products – reveals the extent of modern expectations of total transparency. Never,

essentially, a human health issue, the scandal of meat adulteration really centred on the breakdown of trust in the food supply chain as less costly (and, crucially, undeclared) ingredients supplanted others. That the cheap meat pie is ideal for such subterfuge would not have surprised our forebears. A melange of chopped meat, concealed beneath pastry, it automatically fosters anonymity of content and provokes questions which, if followed to their natural conclusion, are increasingly worrisome. From the relatively benign 'What cut of the animal is this from?', through 'Which animal is this from?', to the grisly motif that recurs across texts as diverse as *Titus Andronicus* and *Sweeney Todd*, 'Who is this from?', some products lend themselves readily to being compromised. Hence the well-known joke of the butcher who will not eat other butchers' sausages because he does not know what's in them, nor will he eat his own, because he does.

Taking a chance

Yet we sometimes seek a return to chance, to un-tried culinary experience, even to danger, in our food choices. Travel, and the associated contact with unfamiliar foodstuffs, can bring about experience of unknown tastes. 'What is that?', 'What will it taste like?', 'What am I eating?', and 'Will I be alright?' are questions many of us will have asked – if only inwardly – on overseas trips. Though, sadly, the hegemony of global English and the tendency of the most *recherché* international foods to be 'discovered' by peripatetic supermarket buyers and presented on Western shelves make it increasingly unlikely to encounter novel foodstuffs. Relatedly, dining-in-the-dark restaurants, especially combined with a surprise menu, allow patrons to reverse not merely the norms of restaurant-going, like seeing your plate or the person opposite, but reintroduce a wider degree of doubt into gustatory experience, reminding us how little we can tell from taste alone.

Doritos 'Roulette' (as in Russian roulette) has a few very fiery chips in each bag, allowing consumers a degree of risk – albeit closely-managed risk – in eating a product where, deliberately, no visual cue exists to allow differentiation between the few hot



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and the many innocuous chips. Spanish consumers would recognize this as experientially parallel to their 'Pimientos del Padrón', (scientific name, *Capiscum Annuum*) often served as tapas. A variety of small, usually mild, green pepper, the occasional one – the Padrón or Godfather – is decidedly hotter. A plate of Pimientos del Padrón will typically have a couple of hot ones, the effects of which are pleasantly mitigated by cold beer. It is a depressing indictment of our national diet that what exists in Spain as part of the recommended five a day (or is that now seven, as suggested by *The Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/forget-five-a-day-new-research-suggests-that-you-need-seven-portions-of-fresh-fruit-and-veg-per-day-to-live-longer-9226653.html>?) portions of vegetables and fruit, finds its closest parallel in a snack aisle product. With Britain consuming more than half of the crisps and savoury snacks sold in Europe (Blythman, 2006: xvi) this is hardly a product category that is not already, in every sense, saturated.

Considered alongside the many highly-spiced foods available to Western consumers, the degree of fineness of the hot chips lurking in a bag of Doritos 'Roulette' is unremarkable. Countless brands of chili sauces and other products offer us taste experiences heralded as 'insane' or, more ubiquitously, 'max', 'maxed' or 'to the max'. This motif is as well-worn as the recurring trope of the

car advertisement in which the vehicle, invariably a conveyance of the most quotidian type, is yoked to ideas and images of adventure sports, risky thrill-seeking in frontier landscapes, and the rejection of humdrum office routine. Relatedly, a staple of the (UK) Indian restaurant menu is the well-known ascending scale of heat that rises from the mild Korma to the blow-your-head-off Phall; the latter concocted specifically by British Asian restaurateurs to satisfy the macho thrill-seeker. Yet, clearly, what heat alone fails to deliver is the element of unknowing that has otherwise been so diminished in contemporary foodways.

In a culinary culture where the direction of travel has been towards standardization, traceability and security it is intriguing to observe a product that runs counter-wise, that offers – in howsoever *ersatz* a fashion – variability, chance, and risk. To doubt and occasionally be surprised by our food can, it appears, be reinvented.



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