Book Reviews

Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud, from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee. *By Bee Wilson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xiv + 384 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, $26.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-13820-6.

Reviewed by Stephen Mihm

In 1844, Friedrich Engels dedicated several revealing paragraphs of *The Condition of the English Working Class* to the subject of adulterated food. Cataloging a stomach-churning list of frauds—sugar mixed with "the refuse of soap-boiling establishments," coffee cut with chicory, cocoa blended with "fine brown earth," and gypsum mixed with flour—Engels lamented that "the poor, the working people . . . who must buy many things with little money, who cannot afford to inquire too closely into the quality of their purchases . . . to their share fall all the adulterated, poisoned provisions." This was no accident. As Bee Wilson demonstrates in her history of fraudulent food, adulteration went hand and hand with the rise of industrial capitalism, and as with other ill effects of that transformation, the burden fell mainly on the working poor.

Wilson's story begins in England, which was the first country to simultaneously urbanize and embrace laissez-faire economic policies. In the process, an elaborate regulatory system conceived in medieval times to control food adulteration gradually crumbled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Previously, ancient regulations like the Assize of Bread and Ale dictated what went into everyday foodstuffs, and guilds full of "ale conners," "pepperers," and "garblers" enforced purity laws. But as the power of the guilds waned and urban entrepreneurs gained greater control of the market, the buying and selling of food came to be ruled by the law of caveat emptor.

In the eighteenth century, rumors circulated of bread adulterated with alum (which was true) and ground-up bones from charnel houses (which was not). But the full extent of food adulteration did not become public knowledge in Britain until the 1820s, when German-born chemist Friedrich Accum published *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food, and Culinary Poisons*. Wilson dedicates an entire chapter to Accum's startling revelations: vinegar adulterated with sulfuric acid; pickles colored with copper; sugary confections dyed red with lead; and pepper mixed with floor sweepings. Many of these frauds, Accum observed, followed from the growing number of middlemen separating the original producer and ultimate consumer of foodstuffs. "It is a painful reflection," wrote Accum, "that the division of labour which has been so instrumental in bringing the manufacturers of this country to their present

flourishing state, should have also tended to conceal and facilitate . . . fraudulent practices" (p. 30).

For all the scandalous outrage that Accum provoked, little changed. Wilson blames the popularity of laissez-faire and limits on suffrage: in the absence of working-class political power, many entrepreneurs could maintain the fiction that adulteration was a small price to pay for the abundance of the free market. "It was a 'buyer beware' culture," laments Wilson, one that "foisted huge responsibility onto a population that lacked even basic democratic rights" (p. 95).

All that would change by the 1850s, when medical doctor Arthur Hill Hassall effectively used the microscope to uncover a disturbing array of fraudulent practices. Working with Thomas Wakely, founder and editor of the *Lancet*, Hassall sampled food from stores throughout London, and published the results—and the names and addresses of shops selling adulterated goods. Thanks to Hassall and Wakely, oversight of the food supply expanded dramatically in the 1860s and 1870s, and a few savvy manufacturers soon recognized that the new focus on purity might pay dividends. Thus, when Hassall praised provisioner Crosse & Blackwell for no longer adding copper to its pickles, the company loudly marketed their products as natural. "In the hands of Crosse & Blackwell," Wilson writes, "purity became a marketing device; and it has been so ever since" (p. 143).

The United States went through much the same historical trajectory as Britain, if a bit later. Epidemic food fraud, shocking revelations in the press, and, eventually, stiffer regulation and oversight of the food supply paved the way for brands whose reputations depended on purity. Here, Wilson takes readers through the controversies over swill milk (from cows fed distillery waste); the battle over margarine, or "bogus butter"; the careers of reformers and muckrakers like Harvey Washington Wiley and Upton Sinclair; and the emergence of brands like Heinz ketchup, which was ostentatiously proclaimed to be free of benzoates. All this is a familiar narrative, and as in other portions of the book, Wilson relies heavily on published works and primary sources. But what Wilson's work arguably lacks in original historical research it more than makes up for by telling a comprehensive story that ranges across continents and centuries.

The closing chapters take the story up to the present, examining how the very concept of adulteration changed in the twentieth century with the rise of ersatz, or "substitute foods" (p. 228). Many of these were developed in wartime, and while Wilson devotes only a single paragraph to the Nazi experiments with fake foods, she does a good job of capturing a startling shift: mock foods went from being a necessary evil to "superior alternatives to the real food they replaced" (p. 214). As

Wilson readily concedes, many of the foods and flavorings developed during and after World War II were not adulterated in the classic sense of the word; consumers knew they were dealing with something other than the real thing. Still, she makes the case that the twentieth-century embrace of fake foods is in the tradition of classic food adulteration. It's a somewhat polemical argument, though one that is not without merit: given that there are literally thousands of artificial flavors in the arsenal of modern food manufacturers, displaying the words "artificial flavor" on a label doesn't tell the consumer all that much.

Wilson ends with the recent revelations of adulteration in the industrial cities of the developing world. Tainted infant formula became a scandal in China, and even more disgusting concoctions soon surfaced: "edible lard" made from recycled sewage and tofu cakes made of gypsum. It's a deadly feast that Engels would readily recognize were he alive today.

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Brewing Battles: A History of American Beer. *By Amy Mittelman.* New York: Algora Publishing, 2008. 229 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, $34.95; paper, $22.95. ISBN: cloth, 978-0-87586-573-7; paper, 978-0-87586-572-0.

Reviewed by Howard R. Stanger

Brewing Battles is a study of the relations between government and the beer industry, specifically on the impact of taxation and the industry's continuing struggle to keep the forces of temperance at bay. The descriptions of the cultural history of beer, featuring the barons who developed dynastic businesses, add the froth.

Amy Mittelman's introductory point, that "the United States is a beer drinking country," will surprise few people. She adds that "Americans drink an average of twenty-two gallons of beer a year" (p. 5). Since colonial days, beer drinking, both legal and illegal, has been an integral part of American life—in households and taverns, at work and in leisure, at public and private celebrations, and in wars. In the 1840s, the industry's growth was sharply boosted by the large influx of Germans, whose brewers created a lighter lager beer. Its popularity contributed to a threefold increase in per capita consumption of beer between

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