The Reality of Processed Foods

By KRYSTAL GABERT, Associate Editor, Food Manufacturing

Some American consumers seem to believe that a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy with regard to the production of our food is the only thing that keeps Americans eating pre-packaged and processed foods—that if we were exposed to the real processes by which our food made it to the shelf, we’d all fork over the extra dollars and spend the extra hours required to cook fresh produce and free range meat.

This opinion—perpetuated by Michael Pollan and others in the “real food” movement—may have some merit. But I think American society is steeped in the kinds of cultural and historical lore that make these kinds of broad-brush indictments of mass-produced food easier to swallow. Upton Sinclair’s 1908 novel, *The Jungle*, focused on the food safety, animal welfare and employment conditions inside the American meat packing industry at the time. It was, perhaps, the first time Americans were made aware of how exactly their food was produced, and the public did not like what they saw. In fact, Sinclair’s novel was a catalyst in some of our earliest food safety and employee welfare laws—many of which are still on the books today.

The modern consumer’s ideas about food production are informed by a culture whose first exposure to the inner-workings of the food industry was less-than-savory. And these ideas of Machiavellian corporations hatching diabolical plots to destroy the world with food—and the corresponding notion that: *if only the public knew, they would stop the madness!*—still float around. Paul McCartney famously said that “if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian.” And every single person I know who has worked as a server in a restaurant has chanted the mantra-like refrain: “once you know what happens in those kitchens, you’ll never want to eat in a restaurant again.”

Now, I’ve never been to a slaughterhouse and I’ve never worked in a restaurant. I

also was not alive in 1908. So I have no idea what to make of McCartney, my friends or Upton Sinclair, respectively, but I do know that after touring several food processing plants, I leave feeling better about where my food comes from.

Like most Americans, I try as hard as I can to eat healthily, and, for me, this means eating a lot of fresh produce. Whenever I'm in a rush or have left my lunch sitting on my kitchen table I grab a bag or container of pre-packaged, processed food—and do so with a bit of shame, I must admit. But each time I tour a facility, the food processed there is inevitably added to my "guilt-free" list. And since the guilt-free list is growing longer by the month, I have to believe that perhaps it's time for American consumers to hear that there's a pretty good chance that food processing facilities are not trying to poison them under the cloak of darkness. And that simply because something is removed from a plastic sleeve before it is eaten does not mean that it's somehow not "real food." The distinction between a pre-packaged donut and a pre-packaged container of yogurt is, perhaps, more important than the distinction between fresh-churned and pre-packaged yogurt.

The food facility managers and owners I've spoken with actively work toward better relationships with their employees, high safety and cleanliness scores and—in many cases—a commitment to natural ingredients. Seeing these commitments in action has given me more confidence in the industry that feeds the nation—not less.

What do you think? Let me know: krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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