

## Conspiracy theories

Faced with the vicissitudes of history, it is all too tempting to find solace in the thought that you have been the victim of a grand conspiracy. Bad things are the work of an external cabal; they are most certainly not our own fault.

And so it was with considerable interest that I approached the new work from Michael Moss, *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (Random House, NYC; 2013). Moss, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter with *The New York Times*, provides a lively narrative history of American processed food over the past 30 years. His protagonists are the product-development pioneers who have shaped the American diet. From soft drinks, to breakfast cereals, Moss explains how processed food has been engineered to maximize its allure.

Exactly the same criticisms are regularly applied in the world of wine. American wine importer and *World of Fine Wine* contributor Terry Theise uses an extended passage from wine writer Stuart Pigott as part of his manifesto on the catalog of his 2012 selections. Pigott targets the “fluffy white bunny taste” of superficial attractiveness found in many wines that descends into “gooey kitsch” with more time in the glass. For Pigott, this inoffensive combination of fruity aromatics and soft textures appeals to our “baby-taste,” which is more useful to large-scale commercial producers because it is “not culturally determined and therefore [not] a serious obstacle to trans-cultural wine brands.” Achieving such a flavor profile is a consequence of manipulation in the cellar, and industrial wine is as heavily engineered for hyperpalatability as any snack food.

So far, so sinister. Unfortunately, what comes from the story of the industrial food and wine product development is not a grand conspiracy to reduce all food to simple and heavily marketed cocktails of salt, fat, and sugar. Far from it. There is a clear drive to reduce costs and enhance margins, a drive toward extra processing and



Francis Percival

boosting the perceived convenience for the consumer. Raw materials have been reduced to the basest of commodities, devoid of distinguishing individual properties. How many more uses can be found for corn and soya? But at every stage, the industry is characterized by a profound and paranoid desire to discover what its consumers like and want. The gastronomic apocalypse is driven by data, to an almost comical degree.

In the late 1980s, faced with the long-term decline in sales of its bologna, executives at Oscar Mayer (now part of Kraft) launched a development project that would ultimately result in Lunchables. Aimed squarely at children and their guilty working parents, Lunchables are individual serving-sized trays of processed meat, crackers, and Kraft's American cheese. The first part of the development cycle was to understand why consumers had stopped buying bologna. Was it because of concerns about the health implications of dietary fat? No, the answer from focus groups was clear: It was the lack of time to make a bologna sandwich, rather than a judgment of its nutritional merits, that was determining purchasing decisions. The Lunchables concept was developed to address this need, and at each stage, contents, packaging, and even marketing were

carefully tested with small groups of consumers. Our concern should not be so much that huge corporations are manufacturing cynical foods but that we have been telling them that is what we want.

Within any culture of food or wine, the idea of quality is an accumulation of learned preferences. No baby fresh from the womb would enjoy, let alone appreciate, Le Chambertin. But over time, we learn those attributes that we particularly prize. There might be some disagreement—just look at the tasting section of this magazine—but a culture will generally share a language of quality. Often, the most highly prized foods can be some of the most challenging at first encounter. A well-made Negroni or an India Pale Ale both demand work on the part of the consumer. In both cases, our aesthetic regard for the product overcomes our evolutionary dislike of bitter tastes.

The tasting panels and focus groups involved in the development of industrial processed foods have not steered them toward sophisticated learned preferences. Bud Light is not packed with hoppy bitterness. There is every reason to believe that the sampling and statistical methods used by these companies are sound, so I am driven to the conclusion that industrial food and wine is the symptom, and not the cause, of a wider and more troubling disengagement from food. Before there was a crisis of our food system, there was a crisis of our food culture.

Still, conspiracy theories do have one great benefit. They make it easier for us to change our mind. It might be a politician (“We never really voted for that guy’s policies; we were duped!”), or it might be a style of wine (“Nobody actually enjoyed gobs of fruit; we were in the thrall of powerful critics!”), but by externalizing the blame, it is easier to change tack and move on. I look forward to the day when an industry focus group tells a food-processing giant that the values consumers want in their next product are complexity, authenticity, and uniqueness. ■