

I **BEGAN** my career in nutrition looking at issues surrounding food advertising directed at children. I was a critic not only of the very sweet products promoted for babies, but of the food Disneylands through which their parents—and the rest of us—had to make our way in order to purchase our food. As a budding nutrition educator, I worried that I would probably find it impossible to teach informed decision-making about the twelve to fifteen thousand items found in the average supermarket, even if they were fully and nutritionally labeled. Many of these objects are of such complex and mysterious composition that even the Food and Drug Administration cannot really evaluate their safety and nutritiousness—as it has occasionally been forced to admit.

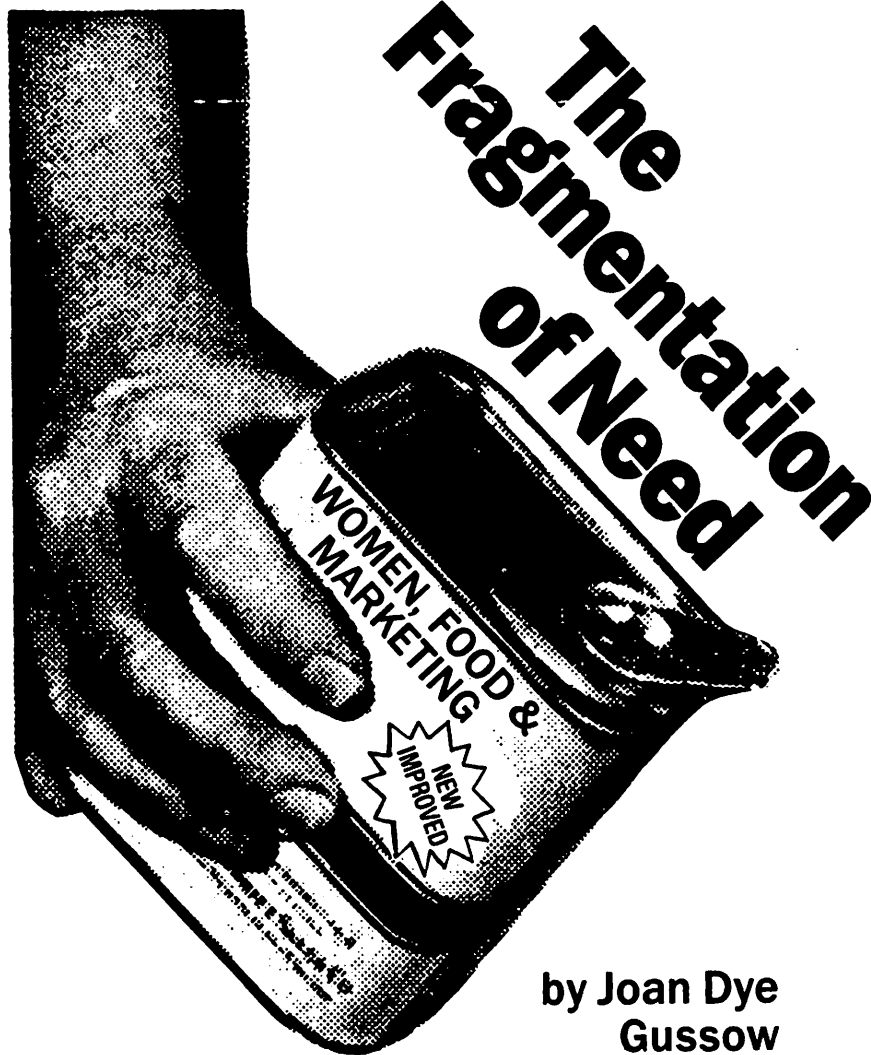
However, many women—including nutrition professionals—are unsettled by criticisms of our abundant food marketplace. While some of us find microwavable popcorn absurd and overpriced, attacks on the proliferative excesses of the supermarket can come to seem like attacks on women's liberation. Much as food professionals deplore some of the nutritional problems created by our food supply, they, like other women, have bought into the notion that "convenience foods" have at least freed women from the drudgery of the kitchen. (The term "convenience food" is used here to refer to any food that has some part of its preparation built in. Anything from a loaf of bakery bread to a frozen hero sandwich will seem a convenience to someone, depending on whether the alternative is baking it yourself or merely assembling the sandwich ingredients.)

Whatever the level of built-in services, "convenience foods" come with a built-in assumption with which we have all lived for some time now—namely, that women have benefitted from the industrialization of food. Presumably, we have been enabled to go out, get jobs, and do all the other things we found it desirable (or financially necessary) to do since our "liberation" because the food marketers met our needs. We believe we have "convenience foods" because we (or most women) need them to allow time for careers and other pleasures. To object to such foods, therefore, seems equivalent to condemning women to kitchen drudgery.

Is this really the case? I myself have always doubted that changes in the food supply were designed to liberate women. I am old enough to remember World War II when many women went out and got jobs—difficult, demanding jobs with long hours—without the benefit of having convenience foods. And then, after the war, when women were told to go back and put on aprons so the homecoming soldier boys would have jobs, suddenly we got a great upsurge in foods designed to save time. The chronology simply didn't support the notion that convenience foods helped women get out of the house.

My own explanation for produce proliferation—from 800 products in 1928 to 15,000 or more today—is that it arises from a food industry growth problem.

In the sort of economics by which we are used to measuring "success," growth is the name of the game. Industries must continue to grow or they die. In a society that values consumption as an expression of personality and a reflection of success, people can always be sold on wanting new and



by Joan Dye Gussow

different things, or the same things in greater numbers. And most commodities can be acquired well beyond need—you can have three houses, five cars, eight navy blue jackets or 3000 pairs of shoes. But food is an exception. There is a biological limit on food consumption. Even if people are willing to become overweight so they can continue to eat, there are quite narrow limits beyond which humans cannot go in consuming food.

So if population growth levels off, as it pretty much has in this country, the food industry cannot continue to grow by selling the same amount of food to more people, because there aren't that many more people to sell to. They must sell the same number of people more food, or they must make the same amount of food cost more. So overconsumption is promoted ("You can't eat only one..."), as are non-caloric foods that allow us to consume far beyond need and yet avoid being as fat as our overindulgence would normally imply. And, with a dazzling display of inventiveness, food marketers have also made use of novelty and overprocessing to induce us to buy less food value for more money.

To return to our main argument then, although the standard assumption is that we have convenience foods because women wanted to get out of the kitchen, other evidence suggests that we have convenience foods as an artifact of the food industry's necessity for growth.

Several years ago, both of these theories appeared in adja-



**Helen Redman,
Home Ecchh,
plasticized collage cutout.**

cent articles in a special issue of *Nutrition Reviews* devoted to progress in the food industry. John McKenzie, the author of the first, reviewing the social changes of the past decade—more women working, more female-headed households, fewer children per family, inflation, and so on—concluded that “consequently, the food industry has developed products to meet women’s needs—including their psychological ones.” He then goes on:

Thus, at a price (which to a two-wage-earner household is acceptable), the food industry has taken over many functions previously handled by the housewife, has facilitated her demand to work, and has tried to satisfy some of her latent psychological needs. While in some areas the industry may be reasonably criticized, this... is not one of them. If housewives buy tinned custard, and virtually transfer menu planning to the food industry, it is because of their fundamental desire to transform the nature of their lives. Given that this transformation was almost compulsively demanded, the fairer question is to ask, what would have been the effect upon family life and eating patterns if the food industry had not responded so effectively?¹

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The author of the second article, Henry Arthur, saw the problem quite differently. He observed that the “industrialized food system” had impinged “upon many traditional home-rendered services.”

From a nutritional point of view, we can be happy that in industrialized areas of the world, people are better fed than ever before in history... At the same time, the industrialization of foods, unintentionally, has produced a lot of underemployed housewives and led them to seek employment outside the household.²

McKenzie, in short, says that women insisted on getting out of the house, and the food manufacturers responded; Arthur says that the technological imperative produced “convenience foods” and drove women out of the house. Clearly someone was wrong, and since neither author offered any supporting documentation, it was impossible to determine the verity of either one. Some serious investigation was called for.

Of the many questions that seemed worth asking, one of my students and I have explored two. First, do women really hate to cook? And second, is there any evidence that women’s desire to get out of the household actually led to convenience foods?

Research to answer the second, more difficult, question was done by a doctoral student, Mary Anselmino, and it is her work from which I am largely drawing. What were the factors that led to the acceptance of “food innovations,” as she called them? Anselmino considered the social and economic changes of the twentieth century, including urbanization and women’s expanding role in the labor force. She also examined the technological changes affecting the food industry—the development of certain kinds of processes which enabled certain kinds of products to be manufactured (freezing and canning are obvious examples). For these she drew on histories of the period, including histories of the food industry.

Then, in order to look at direct influences on women’s attitudes toward food innovations, she looked at primary data from three periods, 1929 to 1933, 1939 to 1943, and 1949 to 1953, bracketing the great depression, the entry into World War II and the immediate post-war period. For these three periods, a total of fifteen years but covering a time span of twenty-five years, she looked at every copy of the two major advertising journals, *Printers Ink* and *Advertising and Selling*, to get information on the aspirations, intentions and techniques of advertisers, focusing especially on all articles about the advertising of food. She also looked at every copy of *Good Housekeeping*, one of the leading women’s magazines from this period (since through much of this period, magazines—not television, which has emerged since—were the major carriers of food advertising). She looked at every food advertisement that dealt with ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, soup, commercially prepared cakes, cake mixes, canned and frozen vegetables, baby foods, orange juice and prepared, canned, and frozen entrees and specialties.

These particular categories were chosen because they included foods that were either first introduced during the time period covered, or showed a marked increase in popularity during the period. The ads were systematically examined for what they could reveal about the strategies used in a given time period to promote a particular product.

In addition, Mary examined every *article* about food that appeared in *Good Housekeeping* during the fifteen years in ques-

tion. And, finally, she looked at the major home economics texts of the period to examine the information and attitudes expressed toward food innovation by the food professionals of the era.

In an unpublished dissertation, Anselmino wrote:

My conclusions about the factors that have influenced the emergence and acceptance of food innovations are similar in some respects to the reasons that industry offers concerning the introduction of new products or product variations. Industry argues that such items appear on the market in response to consumer demands brought about by rising incomes, the increasing opportunity cost of one's time (i.e., the cost of sacrificing the next best alternative use of one's time), growing negative attitudes toward food preparation, and changing lifestyles. My investigation has pointed out the role that industry had in fostering negative attitudes toward food preparation and, to some extent, in emphasizing the opportunity cost associated with food preparation. Even before women were entering the labor force, food ads told them of the enjoyable times that could be theirs if they spent less time involved in food preparation.³

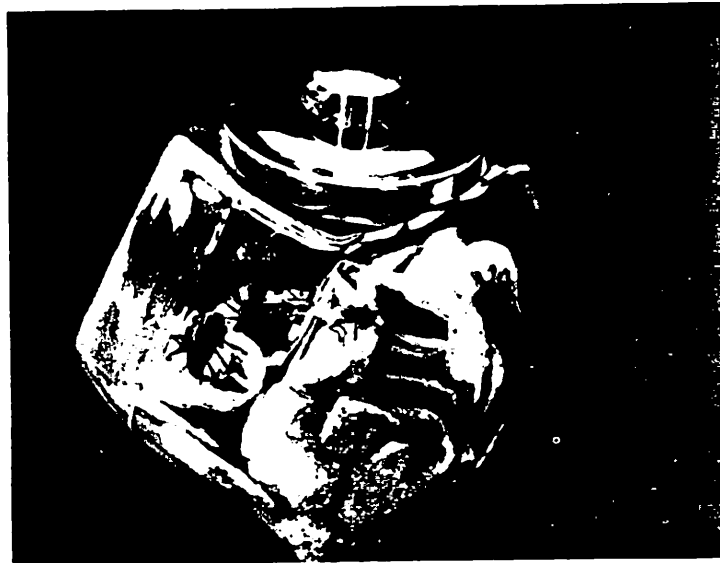
This is a 1932 ad headlined "Turn Your Back on Dull and Needless Labor" from *Good Housekeeping*, as described by Anselmino:

The ad included two pictures of women at work in the kitchen. One showed a woman with an expressionless face sitting on a stool cleaning vegetables. Near the table where she worked was a large can labeled "waste." The clock in the picture read 4:25 p.m. In the other picture it was 5:45 p.m. A smiling woman was opening a can of food. The pictures said so much that there really wasn't a need for copy in the ad. Nevertheless, the ad asked, "Have you banished into the dim past the irksome, time-taking problems of meal preparation?" The ad went on to describe the "modern-minded" housewives who had. "These women are avoiding the tiresome, unpleasant tasks of sorting, cleaning, cutting and paring—time-consuming labor that robs many a woman of hours she might use in other ways. Surely, every woman will be happier if she saves herself an hour or more a day by following the smart, modern practice of those who have learned that canned food means freedom from drudgery and a new opportunity for the delicate personal touch so vital to all good cooking."⁴

Given the profound disappointment that canned vegetables must be to anyone who has ever tasted fresh ones, it is interesting to note that the most heavily advertised products during this period were canned vegetables. What was being sold in ads like this was the notion that cooking was using time that could better be used for more delightful activities. But remember, this was 1932, the depression, when jobs and money were both scarce. For which delightful activities were women saving time?

Anselmino discovered that the very attitudes among women that were supposed to have created a demand for convenience were actively promoted by the media women were exposed to; the food processors recognized the housewife as their most powerful rival. Because of women's positive feelings about their own work, early ads for processed foods could only hint that cookery was a form of drudgery.

Yet the evidence shows that, well into the twentieth century, many women failed to view cooking as old-fashioned, necessary drudgery or hard, dirty, exacting work. There were



Kathryn Sins, Everyone Loves Grandma's Sugar Cookies, glass, clay, plastic, 1984.

indications in women's magazines and in home economics texts in the '20s and '30s indicating that women found food preparation a creative and enjoyable process. And these same magazines and many of the books worked to erode such traditional values.

Not only was cooking portrayed as hard work, but food was portrayed as a raw material, valued not for its intrinsic deliciousness, but for its uniformity and its qualities as a scientifically malleable raw material. (The role turn-of-the-century home economists played in setting women up for this transformation has only recently been brilliantly laid out in a new book called *Perfection Salad* by Laura Shapiro.) As Anselmino shows, ads and articles celebrated the disappearance of seasonal influences on the food supply (so we now have tasteless tomatoes year round and no asparagus season at all). In the 1920s and '30s women were told that home canning was a waste of time in light of the wonderful canned goods now on the market. They were told they could save money and time by trusting the experts in their spotless, sunlit, industrial kitchens (the commercial kitchens the ads described seemed inevitably sunny!). There were repeated assurances about the *quality* of commercial foods, commercially prepared foods were of a uniform quality unmatched (and by inference, unmatched) at home. Women were told they would be modern and up-to-date if they used these products. And influential home economists like Christine Fredericks told women they had many other interests besides cooking which would utilize surplus brains and time.

In short, while technology made certain food items possible, the technology to make certain foods—frozen vegetables, cake mixes, canned spaghetti, commercial cakes, baby foods—was often available long before industry was able to create a demand for such foods by overcoming existing prejudices against them.

Anselmino discovered that women were insistently urged to see cooking as time-consuming and laborious: but her data allowed her only to *infer* that women did not already see things that way. What evidence is there that women do, or did, hate to cook? My search for an answer to *this* question led me from a feminist bookstore in Manhattan to the library system of the University of California. I found almost nothing in print that even touched on the topic. But in the few serious studies that had been done looking at women's attitudes toward housework, food preparation turned out to be one of the *liked* tasks—especially when women no longer had to chop the wood to feed the fire in order to cook. Obviously, there are women who hate cooking; there probably always were. But there is no documentation that food preparation is, or was, a widely disliked task, just as there is no proof that a widely articulated hatred of cooking preceded the introduction of "convenience foods."

What there is evidence of, as Anselmino's dissertation illustrates over and over, is that advertisers saw the woman who *could not cook* as advancing civilization. Consider the following article, entitled "Can Opener Cooking" from the November 24, 1932 issue of *Printers Ink*. After celebrating the growth of

research laboratories in the U.S., the author notes that

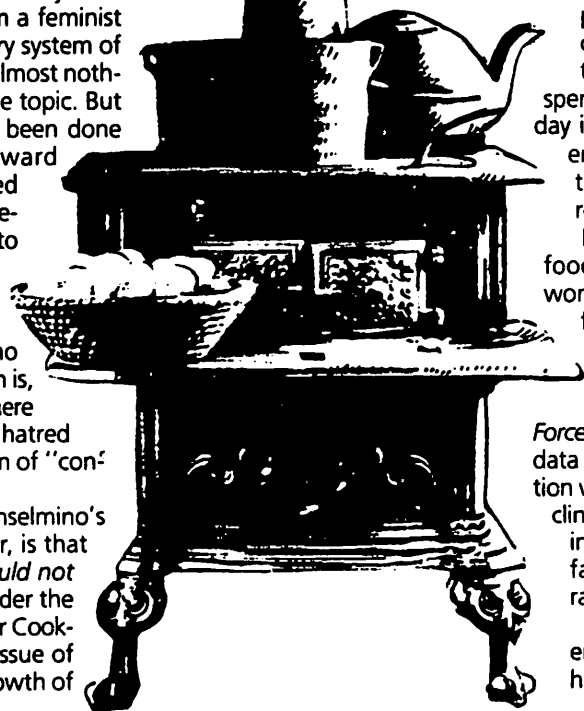
Science... is replacing more and more of the traditional foods that mother was supposed to make—the American male is a wiser and better man. Generally speaking, mother wasn't much of a cook. Science, symbolized by the can opener, is taking her place in that respect. The can opener cook, even though she gets that way through indolence or ignorance, is advancing civilization.

Manufacturers' motivations notwithstanding, it could be argued that it is not women's attitudes toward cooking that lie behind convenience foods, but the fact that—as their name suggests—convenience foods save time. Turning the burden of food preparation over to the food industry must surely have freed women to do other things with their waking hours. As it happens, there are data on women's use of time collected over a number of decades. What they show is that despite all the kitchen conveniences we now have, despite supermarkets and convenience foods and self-regulating ovens, there was, until very recently, astonishingly little change in the amount of time women devote to food-related chores.

Kathryn Walker of Cornell University, who did the most extensive work on this question, showed that the time devoted to all food-related activities had declined by one half-hour a day between 1927 and 1968. But during this period, the time per day devoted to marketing and record keeping had gone up by *more* than half an hour (All homemaking actually took about forty-five minutes *more* each day in 1967 than it had forty years earlier!) Although employed homemakers spent less time in both periods on food-related activities, their pattern was similar.⁵ By 1977, shopping occupied an *additional* half-hour of *family* time and twelve minutes more of the housewife's time than it had ten years earlier, but there was no significant decline in the time spent on food preparation.⁶ Time spent on dishwashing had declined by twelve minutes during the decade.⁷ A later report on data gathered in 1978 showed that when employed and unemployed wives are compared, the unemployed (that is, the not *gainfully* employed) wife spends about twelve minutes more per day in meal preparation than does the employed wife.⁸ This is an amount of time whose practical significance the researchers (and I) question.

Further confirmation of the fact that food "modernization" did not free women for participation in the work force comes from an entirely different literature. The most detailed study of the question ever made, Oppenheimer's *The Female Labor Force in the United States*, concluded that data on women's labor force participation would not support the idea that declines in "the burden of housework"—including cooking—were a "major factor in the rise in female work rates."

Although there was a much greater increase in "convenience" in the household before World War II than



after World War II, there were much greater changes in the female work rates after the war than between 1900 and 1940. All the changes that occurred before World War II—from coal and wood stoves to gas and electric ones, from washboards to washing machines, and from home gardens and summers of canning to canned goods and supermarkets—should have released women from much more work than did the technological refinements in stoves, refrigerators, washing machines and “convenience foods” that occurred after 1940. Women, Oppenheimer concluded, were *pulled* into the work-force, not *pushed* into it by free time, and they were pulled by the availability of certain kinds of jobs, “requiring skill but not long-range commitment, specialized location or high remuneration.” In short, women’s work.⁹

And finally, all studies that have been done comparing employed and non-employed women’s use of convenience food show essentially no differences. Surprisingly, the latest study suggests that women who stay at home may even use more convenience foods. And Market Research Corporation recently reported that employed mothers feed their children better than nonemployed mothers—that is, they use fewer sugared (convenience) cereals, more fresh foods, and so on. This seems a fitting tombstone for the idea that the food industry has been striving to free us from the kitchen so we can have it all.

What I believe all this indicates is that the food industry has grown, as it will continue to grow, driven by a technological impetus which is, in turn, driven by a need for continued growth. Growth is achieved by creating food innovations that housewives and other working women must be convinced they need. This means that we as women must decide whether we want and need these food objects on some basis other than a belief that they have been made for our benefit and will ultimately save us time.

The beliefs about women and food that advertisers were selling twenty, thirty and forty years ago were not true; yet we came to believe they were true and, in the process, we helped disempower ourselves. The messages about how we would be freed from kitchen slavery succeeded in making us slaves to the manufacturers on whom we are now entirely dependent, since many of us have lost—or never acquired—the skills needed to convert raw food materials into consumables. It is no laughing matter that we are part of a second generation of Minute Rice users. We may not all wish to learn to cook—even if it is now more prestigious because men are doing it too. But we should, at a minimum, reexamine the myths that blind us. Food is not merely a feared source of calories, or a symbol of our enslavement; it is essential to human survival. ♦♦

1 John McKenzie, “Social Changes and the Food Industry,” *Nutrition Reviews*, No. 40, January 1982 Supplement, p. 13.

2 Henry Arthur, “The Role of Industrial Food in the Family Economy,” *Nutrition Reviews*, No. 40, January 1982 Supplement, p. 13.

3 Mary Anselmino and Mary Wiza, “Factors Influencing the Emer-



gence and Acceptance of Food Innovations in Twentieth-Century America,” Diss. Columbia University, 1985.

4 Ibid.

5 Kathryn Walker, “Homemaking Still Takes Time,” *Journal of Home Economics*, 1968, Vol. 61, No. 8, p. 621.

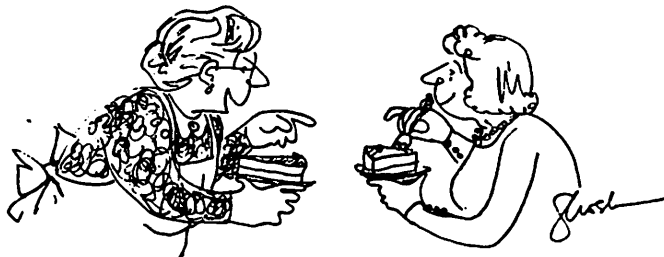
6 Kathryn Walker and Margaret Sanik, “The Potential for Measurement of Non-Market Household Production with Time-Use Data,” Paper presented to the International Sociological Association’s World Congress of Sociology, August 16, 1978 (Uppsala, Sweden).

7 Karen Goebel, “Time Use and Family Life,” *Family Economics Review*, Summer 1981, pp. 20-25.

8 K.P. Goebel and C.B. Hennon, “Time Consumed in Meal Preparation and Its Substitution by Purchased Meals: An Analysis of Dual and Single Wage Earner Families,” *American Council on Consumer Interest*, April 1981, pp. 50-56.

9 Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), pp. n.a.

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It’s my mother’s recipe of dextrose, hydrogenated soybean oil, propylene glycol monoesters, cellulose gum, and Yellow No. 5 coloring!