



HAL
open science

**Amy Bentley, 2014, Inventing baby food: Taste, health,
and the industrialization of the American diet,
University of California Press, Oakland, U.S.A., 256 p**

Marc-Olivier Déplaude

► **To cite this version:**

Marc-Olivier Déplaude. Amy Bentley, 2014, Inventing baby food: Taste, health, and the industrialization of the American diet, University of California Press, Oakland, U.S.A., 256 p. Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies, 2016, 97 (1), pp.63-64. 10.1007/s41130-016-0005-6 . hal-02629809

HAL Id: hal-02629809

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02629809>

Submitted on 2 Feb 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Amy Bentley, 2014, *Inventing Baby Food: Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet*, University of California Press, Oakland, U.S.A., 256 p

Marc-Olivier Déplaude¹

Published online: 29 March 2016
© INRA and Springer-Verlag France 2016

In the emerging field of food studies, Amy Bentley's latest book traces the history of a category of products which now plays an important role in feeding infants and young children: commercial baby food. Focusing exclusively on solid foods (and therefore not on infant formulas), she defends the idea that in the United States, the huge success that these products have achieved since the 1930s has helped to change the Americans' taste and has predisposed them from a very young age to enjoying highly processed foods.

The book proceeds in a chronological manner and highlights two main periods. The first runs from the end of the nineteenth century through to the 1950s and shows how commercial baby food became a “fully naturalized product” (p. 9). Sold in tins, the first mass-produced baby foods were initially a luxury product, sold exclusively in chemist's shops. It was not until the 1920s that certain manufacturers—notably Gerber, who very quickly dominated this new market—attempted to turn baby foods into everyday consumer products. To this end, they lowered their production costs, turned to new distribution channels (grocery stores instead of chemist's shops) and developed highly diversified product ranges in such a way as to increase opportunities for children to eat them. These foods nevertheless remained more expensive than ordinary foods, so it was important that they were not perceived as ordinary foodstuffs themselves. To encourage mothers to buy them, manufacturers mobilised very considerable marketing resources (advertising, letters to

young mothers, free samples), not just to demonstrate the quality of the products and how easy they were to use, but also to convince people that these foods, which were produced using scientific methods, were better suited to children's needs than meals prepared at home. In order to increase their chances of success, companies also tried to rally family doctors, paediatricians and nutritionists to their cause, relying on their supposed influence over the choices mothers made.

Despite a difficult economic and social context, baby food sales saw spectacular growth as from the 1930s. Doctors and nutritionists were more inclined to recommend using such products since the discovery of vitamins in the 1910s had led them to encourage an earlier introduction of fruit and vegetables into infant diets. They recommended that they be used as from 4–6 months—even as early as 4–6 weeks in the 1950s—and no longer at 12 months as had been the case at the end of the nineteenth century. They also criticised certain domestic practices such as long cooking times, which destroyed the vitamins. These discourses had an even greater influence on mothers in as much as their level of education was on the increase and they often lived much further away from their original families. They therefore turned in far greater numbers to literature promoting “scientific motherhood”, which stated that the modern mother should defer to the authority of doctors and scientists.

Arguing the very wide distribution of baby foods, which in the 1950s became an everyday consumer product, Amy Bentley concludes that they have helped to transform American taste. At that time, there was little difference between baby foods and ordinary tinned food: they contained salt, sugar and additives designed to ensure high stability and a long shelf life. However, the sterilisation process and the addition of salt, sugar and additives significantly modified the original taste of the products. From a very young age,

✉ Marc-Olivier Déplaude
marc-olivier.deplaude@ivry.inra.fr

¹ INRA, UR1323 RiTME, Ivry-sur-Seine, France

Americans therefore learned to enjoy highly processed foods and to prefer foodstuffs which were already salted or sugared.

The 1960s–1970s marked the start of a new period for commercial baby foods. Previously acclaimed by healthcare professionals and young parents, they now became an object of criticism. Researchers were worried about their high salt and sugar content and the presence of certain additives which might have negative effects on health later on in life. Others defended a return to the later introduction of solid foods, after 4 or 5 months. These arguments were taken up by activists and consumer associations. They denounced the fact that baby foods were developed on the basis of adult tastes and not of a baby's nutritional needs, and felt product labelling to be very unsatisfactory. Finally, movements promoting “natural motherhood” emerged in the 1970s, focusing on the specific skills of mothers and defending mothering practices which brought mother and child closer together. This led to a new valorisation of breastfeeding—which became increasingly popular after a strong post-war decline—and of homemade meals for babies, the preparation of which was made easier by the invention of household food processors.

Although certain manufacturers initially rejected the criticism aimed at them, they all ended up very significantly reducing salt and sugar content or removing them entirely. They also removed certain additives they had been using. However, numerous competitors emerged, marketing baby foods which they described as healthier and better than those already on the market, due to the use of essentially organic ingredients and original recipes, or through the use of preservation techniques other than sterilisation—such as refrigeration or freezing. The major manufacturers followed suit, launching competing product ranges. They thus continued to largely dominate the baby food market (74 % market share for Gerber in 2010).

Amy Bentley's book is an exciting contribution to food studies and cultural studies. It demonstrates the utility of an in-depth study of a specific category of foodstuffs. Tracing the history of baby foods, it highlights the diversity of social processes—industrial practices, evolution in medical knowledge, transformations in domestic roles, collective mobilisations, etc.—which have served not only to turn baby foods into everyday consumer products but also to shape the very characteristics of these

products. One of the most striking results of the book is the evolution, since the end of the nineteenth century, of the age from which it is recommended to introduce solid foods into a baby's diet; it convincingly shows how this evolution is not simply the result of medical knowledge, but of other factors too—and of industrial strategies in particular.

The book does not go into how baby foods are manufactured—none of the companies contacted by the author wished to take part in her research. Yet it would have been interesting to discuss how the criticisms of the 1960s–1970s affected the regulations governing solid foods for infants. Whilst in the European Union, such foods are the object of specific regulations, this would not appear to be the case in the United States. Why is this? It would have been interesting to analyse the lobbying strategies employed by manufacturers and their relations with the Food and Drug Administration in particular. Moreover, although it cannot be denied that baby foods are widely distributed throughout American society, it is probable that it does not occur in an even manner. To what extent is the purchase of baby foods, or of certain types of baby food, a socially distinctive practice, and how has the prestige associated with this type of consumption evolved over time? By taking better account of these social logics, we would gain a better understanding of how the market came into being and then evolved. Finally, whilst the hypothesis that baby foods made a significant contribution to acclimatising Americans to highly processed foods is compelling, it is hard to justify. It supposes that the first few years of one's life are decisive in forming one's tastes as an adult, and that baby foods represent a large proportion of the diet of young Americans. Yet as the study cited by the author in the final chapter of her book shows, baby foods nowadays represent less than half of the solid foods consumed by babies as from 9–11 months, and an infinitesimal proportion of what they eat at 15–18 months. We need to put into perspective the effect that the invention of baby foods has had on the evolution in American food tastes; the latter is probably due more to broader changes to lifestyle and to the food industry.