{essays in history}

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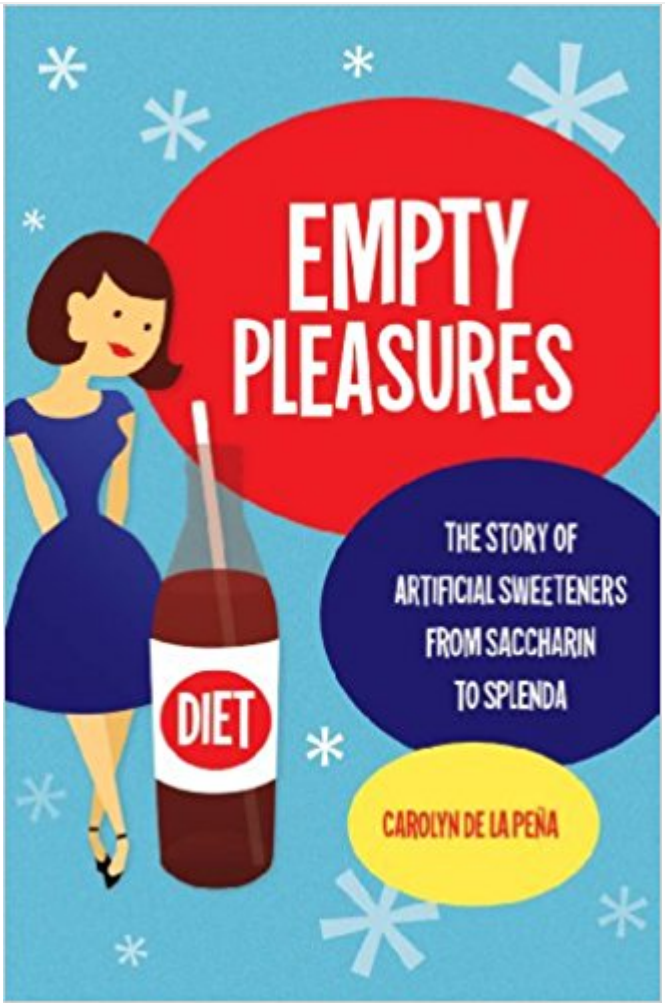
Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda



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Reviewed Work(s)

Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda. By Carolyn de la Peña (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pp. 279. Hardback, $32.50.

Carolyn de la Peña offers food for thought to diet soda habitués who believe their ritualistic consumption of alternative sweeteners will allow them to enjoy the pleasures of consumption without penalty. As Peña explains in *Empty Pleasures,* far from curbing America's obesity epidemic, the artificial sweetener revolution fueled the unhealthy overindulgence of sweet foodstuffs and contributed to the creation of "new systems of nutritional information that encourage decision making based on a confusing array of ever-changing numbers and substitution strategies rather than on the origin, preparation, and taste of food" (10). Peña speaks not as a medical professional or a food scientist—though she did work for a soft drink company in Atlanta before becoming an academic—but as a historian interested in the cultural history of artificial sweeteners. She states outright that she is not concerned with the "chemical compositions and physiological effects" of artificial sweeteners but rather with the "values and beliefs that produced these commodities and enabled their popularity" (6). She tells her story from the perspective of both consumers and producers, showing how a diverse array of actors —pharmacologists, magazine editors, agribusiness executives, and housewives—contributed to a discourse that helped solidify the place of artificial sweeteners as a staple of the American diet. There is no overarching villain in this story, no conspiratorial plot to poison the American populace orchestrated by a profiteering multinational corporation. The diet food craze, in Peña's telling, is as much a product of consumer desires as a construct of America's corporate commonwealth.

Peña's narrative begins with the discovery of saccharin in 1876 and ends with the rise of aspartame in the 1980s. The first chapter captures the consumer revolt against saccharin in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a backlash driven by industrial sugar users and American consumers who attacked the new substance as an unnatural

adulterant that, in their minds, diluted the caloric value of sugar-rich foods. According to Peña, this "prosugar, antisweetener value system" (15) owed its origins as much to the promotional propaganda of Coca-Cola and other confectionary giants as to a culture of domesticity that forged an "intense connection between women and the sugar bowl" (32). By the 1940s, however, this value system dissolved when wartime demand forced the Office of Price Administration to implement rationing restrictions on sugar use. Women during the war were chastised for consuming sugar, a product many believed should be reserved for the fighting men on the frontlines. No longer a culinary ally, "sugar became a symbol for what American women had to give out and give up," a product to be regulated, but not consumed, by patriotic housewives (36).

Chapter 2, "Alchemic Ally," explores how women's experiences during and immediately after World War II helped facilitate a new cultural acceptance of saccharin and cyclamates, the two major artificial sweeteners available on American markets after the 1940s. As Peña explains, women during this period used non-caloric sweeteners as a way to break free from the strictures imposed on them by government rationing programs. Dropping saccharin pills in teas and other beverages, women enjoyed the freedom to indulge, and they did so in very public ways, purchasing elaborate dispensers and other accoutrements that allowed them to enact consumptive rituals in which they played the role of modern alchemists, preparing potent potions with cutting-edge chemical compounds. Thus, by the 1950s, artificial sweeteners "emerged as powerful deliverers of a woman's will" (63).

But American housewives were not the only ones clamoring for artificial sweeteners in the postwar years. In chapter 3, Peña focuses on the partnerships formed between businessmen in the food industry and scientists in pharmacological laboratories who worked together to promote alternative sweetener consumption in the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter is a gender foil to the preceding one, a story of how masculine ambitions facilitated the construction of sweetener empires. Peña's objective is to show how the personal can become political, how the aspirations of individuals can shape policies that have far-reaching effects. The chapter focuses in large part on the life of Edwin Mitchell, a food technologist for the California Canners and Growers , and his interactions with pharmacologists at Abbott Laboratories, then the

nation's largest cyclamates manufacturer. Peña suggests that Mitchell's decision to introduce a new line of canned fruit products sweetened with cyclamates was in part a calculated attempt to accrue "social currency" and not necessarily monetary profit (86). In an argument akin to that made by Richard Hofstadter in his analysis of Progressive-era reformers, Peña maintains that Mitchell's project was not only a response to the "popularity of dieting" and a new consumer acceptance of artificial sweeteners, but also the result of closed-door politicking in which businessmen and pharmacists sought to "enhance their own status by joining forces" (8).[1]

Peña returns to women in chapter 4, this time focusing on female moguls like Tillie Lewis, of Tillie Lewis Foods, and Jean Nidetch, founder of Weight Watchers, who in the 1950s and 1960s conceptualized and executed marketing campaigns designed to encourage diet food consumption. These women, Peña argues, "helped create a popular understanding of artificial sweetener as primarily a diet food for normal women who sought to remain thin though market choices" (106).

Chapter 5 deserves special praise. Relying on thousands of archived letters penned by consumers and received by the Food and Drug Administration and Congress in the months after the announcement of a proposed saccharin ban in 1977, Peña reconstructs the story of one of the most understudied food fights in American history. Convinced that a federal ban would force them to endure serious hardships, saccharin users sent a flood of letters to federal regulators and politicians on Capitol Hill, requesting that artificial sweeteners not be removed from retail shelves. As Peña explains, consumers "felt they had more to gain by consuming [saccharin] than they had to lose," presenting a "worldview in which dangerous external risks were offset by the chosen, pleasurable risk of saccharin" (9). Ultimately, as Peña shows, their appeals were granted and saccharin remained in a host of products for years to come.

The last body chapter of the book offers an analysis of the corporate marketing campaigns that helped encourage consumer acceptance of new sweeteners in the 1980s. This time, Peña focuses on G. D. Searle and Company, highlighting the corporation's gimmicky campaigns to introduce American families to their branded synthetic sweetener, NutraSweet. This is perhaps the best treatment of large-scale marketing

strategies in the book and an illuminating glimpse into the powerful advertising might of corporate America.

Peña's work is ambitious in the breadth of historiographical sub-disciplines it seeks to address, and a diverse array of academics from gender scholars to environmental historians will no doubt find many themes explored within the text fascinating. Nonetheless, at times Peña becomes too focused on fitting her story into scholastic niches. In chapter 2, for example, her gendered analysis becomes labored. At best, this is distracting. At worst, it forces Peña to give too much agency to consumers and too little credit to large corporations that used their prodigious resources to construct markets for their products. She certainly is right to highlight the discursive relationships between consumers and producers, but she does not always strike the right balance, undervaluing the considerable power large sugar users wielded in shaping not only consumer culture but also the political and economic landscape that helped give birth to diet enterprises.

Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of her work is that she does not journey into the world of the human body to understand how biochemical phenomena can shape human behavior. To her credit, Peña states very clearly that this a deliberate choice, one made by distinguished scholars before her like Sidney Mintz, but one questions whether it is ultimately excusable.[2] Our bodies are hardwired to like sweet foodstuffs, featuring complex neurochemical reinforcement mechanisms that stimulate the consumption of sweet substances. In part then, the origin of humans' cravings for artificial sweeteners is biological, not cultural. Taking taste buds out of the equation, Peña privileges culture over physiology, denying any evolutionary explanation for humans' addiction to sugar alternatives. Our desire for artificial sweeteners may be more "natural" than *Empty Pleasures* suggests.

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[1] Hofstadter argued that Progressives were "influenced by marked changes . . . in their social position brought about by the growing complexity of society." He termed this great unsettling of the social

hierarchy the "status revolution." Richard Hofstadter, *Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 148.

[2] In *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking, 1985), Mintz maintained "that the widely variant sugar-eating habits of contemporary populations show that no ancestral predisposition within the species can adequately explain what are in fact culturally conventionalized norms, not biological imperatives" (15).

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