
Who's Winning **THE HUNGER GAMES?**

**MICHAEL MOSS EXPLAINS HOW NABISCO,
KRAFT, AND GENERAL MILLS GOT US TO CRAVE
ALL THE WRONG THINGS.**



BY MATTHEW BUDMAN

FOR YEARS, *NEW YORK TIMES* REPORTER MICHAEL MOSS HAS BEEN DELIVERING THE INSIDE STORY ON WHAT WE EAT, AND THE RESULT HASN'T ALWAYS MADE READERS HUNGRY—IN 2010, HE WON A PULITZER PRIZE FOR “RELENTLESS REPORTING ON CONTAMINATED HAMBURGER AND OTHER FOOD SAFETY ISSUES.” TWO WORDS: PINK SLIME.

In his new book, *Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (Random House), Moss writes about far more appealing grocery items: Lay's Potato Chips and Dr Pepper and Snickers and Hot Pockets and Chips Ahoy! and Pop-Tarts and Capri Sun and Frosted Mini-Wheats. As much as we know we



should bypass those colorful packages—really, we should skip those store aisles altogether—most of us can't help being sucked in. Why? After years of manufacturers' loading up processed foods with salt, sugar, and fat, we're hardwired to crave those ingredients.

Indeed, corporate food scientists have spent decades searching for each item's *bliss point* ("the precise amount of sweetness—no more, no less—that makes food and drink most enjoyable"), and now any effort by the company to tinker with the formula, especially to make the products less unhealthful, results in their tasting a little . . . off.

Moss takes on who's responsible for causing today's obesity epidemic—and how we can move forward to begin solving it. Fortunately, he is no ascetic, which becomes clear when

talking about, as the book describes, companies developing "frozen pizza that boasted two, three, and four different cheeses . . . and then they tucked more cheese into the crust." "Oh, my *gosh*," he says. "The *crust*. Oh!" And then Moss explains both the appeal and why that appeal is so dangerous: "The melted, gooey feeling you get—there are nerves in the back of your mouth that pick up on that and go right to the brain's pleasure center, just like sugar. Except that fat has twice the calories as sugar, so it's a real problem. Today, cheese is the number-one source of saturated fat in the American diet." Just when you were thinking that pizza was sounding particularly good . . .

Moss spoke from the offices of *The New York Times*.

I'm sure this wasn't your intention, but reading *Salt Sugar Fat* made me hungry for salt, sugar, and fat.

I've heard that! And I have to confess: One of my downfalls is potato chips, and when I was writing and researching the book, I would *indulge*. My message is not about avoiding all processed foods, because there's no way I could hew to that line.

It's hard to read about Oreo Fudge Sundae Cremes without craving one. Must be even harder to write about them.

And you have to appreciate the science and effort that goes into them. On some level, these scientists and marketing people are geniuses.

At one point you write: "Picture in your mind a hot pretzel with big white crystals of salt on top—"

Mmm.

"—your brain is probably, at this very moment, sending you signals of pleasure."

Exactly. Maybe the industry will thank me for this book.

Has working on the book changed your eating and buying habits?

Well, for research I would go shopping with my two boys, who are 8 and 13, and watch how they maneuver through the grocery store and see what they're drawn to, and that certainly confirmed everything I'd heard from market researchers. And I've become more cognizant of what we're eating and feeding our kids, in part because there are lots of choices in the grocery store.

Are you now that guy who can't resist telling friends and family what's really in everything they eat and drink?

No—I would never tolerate such a person in my life! There's a funny story: I had been writing about *E. coli* contaminations in meat, and my youngest, Will, had just started kindergarten and had relished the school-lunch hamburgers until he became versed in spelling *E. coli*, and at one point the dinner conversation turned to cookies, and Will said indignantly, "Dad, you're not going to start writing about sugar, are you?" Kids are *so* over the moon about sugar; their bodies are hardwired for it, which explains why so many things in the grocery store have become sweet.

We sneak 100 percent whole-wheat bread into the kids' diets, and they don't seem to mind, though they draw the line at whole-wheat pasta. They will not touch that. So you have to give and take. And my wife the other day said to the kids, "Cereal is OK, but when we buy it, go for the cereal with five

grams or less of sugar per serving." That engages them in the hunt and helps them participate, and sure enough, there are great cereals out there with less sugar. And I've been trying to work oatmeal into the morning family routine.

“That’s what their main job is: to sell products and feed people. And it took a while for their own people to become cognizant and aware of the growing obesity problem.”





Isn't that time-consuming?

"Convenience" foods are a bit of an exaggeration. You know, it all started with a fabulous presentation that Charles Mortimer, the CEO of General Foods, gave to none other than The Conference Board in 1955—the year I was born—all about convenience, with a capital C, as he said. He's the person who coined the phrase *convenience foods*. He was so convinced that this was the way to go that he was eager to share his vision with all other aspects of consumer goods. He *preached* convenience. And back at General Foods, he drove his scientists to find every which way to make food more convenient; things like Tang emerged because of his vision.

So we have Charles Mortimer to thank for Tang.

And The Conference Board, maybe.

You begin the book in 1999, at a summit held to discuss what the big food companies could do about

the growing obesity problem. It was already enough of a priority for Kraft and Pillsbury and General Mills and Nabisco and others to convene to talk about it. How long ago did the companies understand their impact on health? In other words, when was the last time they could claim they didn't know?

It wasn't so much that they didn't know—it was that for so many decades, the largest of the food companies were focused on making foods that were convenient, less expensive, and of good taste. That's what their main job is: to sell products and feed people. And it took a while for their own people to become cognizant and aware of the growing obesity problem. It was only in the mid-'90s that some of their senior people began talking and meeting and discussing among themselves, at a scientific level, what the looming obesity crisis meant.

The 1999 meeting was the first time that the issue was thrust in the faces of CEOs. And it wasn't a happy meeting. The lead presentation wasn't by some government nutrition czar—it was one of their own, a senior executive at Kraft, who lay responsibility at least partly at the feet of the top executives, and pleaded with them to do something. And they had to be envisioning losses of millions of dollars if they started tinkering with these formulas and marketing plans that they had spent years and years perfecting.

You found a number of former executives who had changes of heart, or pangs of conscience, about what their companies made and sold. It feels reminiscent of the tobacco industry, only without the lawsuits and nondisclosure agreements and *The Insider*.

Well, there's a real thread of tobacco and food in the book, starting in the late 1980s. When Philip Morris purchased General Foods and then Kraft, it became the largest food company in the United States. In the early years, Philip Morris treated the food division as it would its tobacco divisions: It encouraged managers to do everything they could to sell more of their products. Among many thousands of pages of internal documents, I came upon the records of the monthly products committee meetings that Philip Morris held, where the food managers would present their latest plan for reformulating, remarketing, repositioning, repackaging foods to increase sales.

And then the company had almost a complete reversal in its attitudes. Philip Morris went through the horrible period—for it—of the '90s, where it came under increasing attack for nicotine in cigarettes. It was the first tobacco company to embrace regulation, on the notion that it was losing the trust of consumers; the company was facing the possibility of losing *everything* if it didn't capitulate. And then it

started to look at its food division. The senior people at Philip Morris started warning the people at Kraft to start being concerned about salt, sugar, and fat and the looming obesity crisis. CEO Geoffrey Bible, who spoke to me for the book, warned the food division that obesity was a problem every bit as great as nicotine was for the cigarette division.

It was Kraft that convened the big 1999 summit meeting, right?


Yes. The chief mission of Michael Mudd, the Kraft vice president who led the meeting, was to try to get the industry to collectively join together to do something about obesity. He knew that the competition between companies was so fierce that if any one struck out on its own to reduce its products' salt, sugar, and fat, it would become a bloodbath in the grocery store, as competitors moved in to claim any forsaken territory on the shelf.

And in fact, this is what played out at Kraft: When it couldn't get the rest of the food companies to participate, it struck out on its own and took a new look at the way it was packaging products and the way it was marketing to children. Ultimately, there was a stunning moment at Kraft in which officials sat down and said, "Look, we need to consider the possibility that we have made these formulas so alluring, so craveable, that we are in fact encouraging people to overeat, and we need to do something about that." Kraft set limits—caps—on the amount of salt, sugar, and fat in all its categories of food, as a way of tamping down the eagerness of their food inventors to hit consumers' bliss points by using as much as possible.

It's worked to some extent over the years—Kraft says that it still maintains the caps and has managed to reduce calories in a good number of products. But they ran into trouble in the cookie aisle in 2003, where Hershey came in with the S'mores bar, which combined chocolate with cookies and scared Kraft to death. They tried to respond with richer cocoa that still met the limits of their cookie caps, but ultimately they had to budge a bit and start creating slightly fatter, richer Oreo-type cookies in order to survive this competition from a company that wasn't embracing the same anti-obesity initiatives. It's an incredible lesson to companies: This is what happens when you jump out too far ahead of the competition.

Seems a perfect opportunity for federal regulators to step in. But you implicate the government throughout the book for aiding and abetting producers at every stage, from farmers through retailers. Why so much government protection?

It speaks to the power of the food industry and its

 **The companies are dependent on salt, sugar, and fat—especially salt.**

importance to the economy—we're talking about a trillion-dollar industry. The Department of Agriculture has multiple missions, and one of them is to support the agricultural industry and the food industry. It also has the mission of protecting consumers and encouraging better nutrition, but when you look at the agency's spending, a minuscule amount of their effort goes toward encouraging people to eat better, as opposed to supporting increased consumption. And it plays out most starkly in government support for dairy and red meat.

You call the USDA a full industry partner in urging Americans to eat more meat and cheese, but on the other hand, it seems as though the companies, in refusing to take the lead in dealing with the implications of salt/sugar/fat, are practically daring regulators to step in and take action.

Yeah, I think they really are. But these companies are between a rock and a hard place, for several reasons. One is the Kraft experience—if you jump out too far ahead, your competitors will eat you alive, and if they don't, Wall Street will.

There's a compelling story about Campbell Soup, which is just a wonderful company—who else would have committed to staying in the town of Camden, New Jersey? They have been trying over the years to cut back on salt, and recently they took the salt levels in one line of their soups to a really commendable level, but sales faltered, and Wall Street analysts balked. The pressure from Wall Street was such that Campbell had to reverse, and they added back in all the salt that they had taken out. It's really illustrative of the pressure on these companies to maintain or increase profits.

I asked Geoffrey Bible about the difficulties that companies like Kraft were having, and he said that while he was no friend of government, if there was ever a place for government to step in, it was here, if only to give these companies some cover from Wall Street: *Yes, we're cutting back here, but the government is making us do it.* He saw how regulation would



be in the companies' best interests.

People are becoming much, much more concerned about what we're putting in our mouths—about obesity and the health effects of processed foods. And yet the companies are dependent on salt, sugar, and fat—especially salt. While we develop salt cravings and get hooked, it's *nothing* like the dependence that the food industry has. It's a miracle ingredient for them. It does *everything*, from providing flavor bursts to covering up awful tastes that are inherent in many processed foods.

These companies know there's a market in things that taste good without salt, sugar, and fat, and they'd all love to have those products on store shelves. But you tasted a number of attempts, right?

Kellogg invited me to their R&D facility, and we sat down and tasted their iconic products, specially made for me without any salt at all.

How were those Cheez-Its?

It was *the* most godawful experience. Cheez-Its are normally something I could eat all day long, and I couldn't even swallow them—they stuck to the roof of my mouth. The frozen waffles tasted like straw. And then we got to the cereal, and it tasted . . . I hesitated to say anything, and then I looked at the expression of one of the technicians who was tasting with me, and he said, "This tastes like *metal*." And it did! It was like a filling had come out of one of my teeth and was sloshing around. It was *horrible*. And they explained to me that that's one of the miracle things that salt does: It masks and overrides these awful flavors that can develop in the formula-

tions, especially those foods that have lots of vitamins and minerals and preservatives added.

Now, these companies *can* cut back by 10 or 20 percent, because they're adding so much now. But when they get to 25 percent, consumer panels say, the taste just falls off a cliff.



“While we develop salt cravings and get hooked, it’s nothing like the dependence that the food industry has.”

Companies say that removing salt and fat severely compromises “consumer preference”—which means, I guess, that people hate the result.

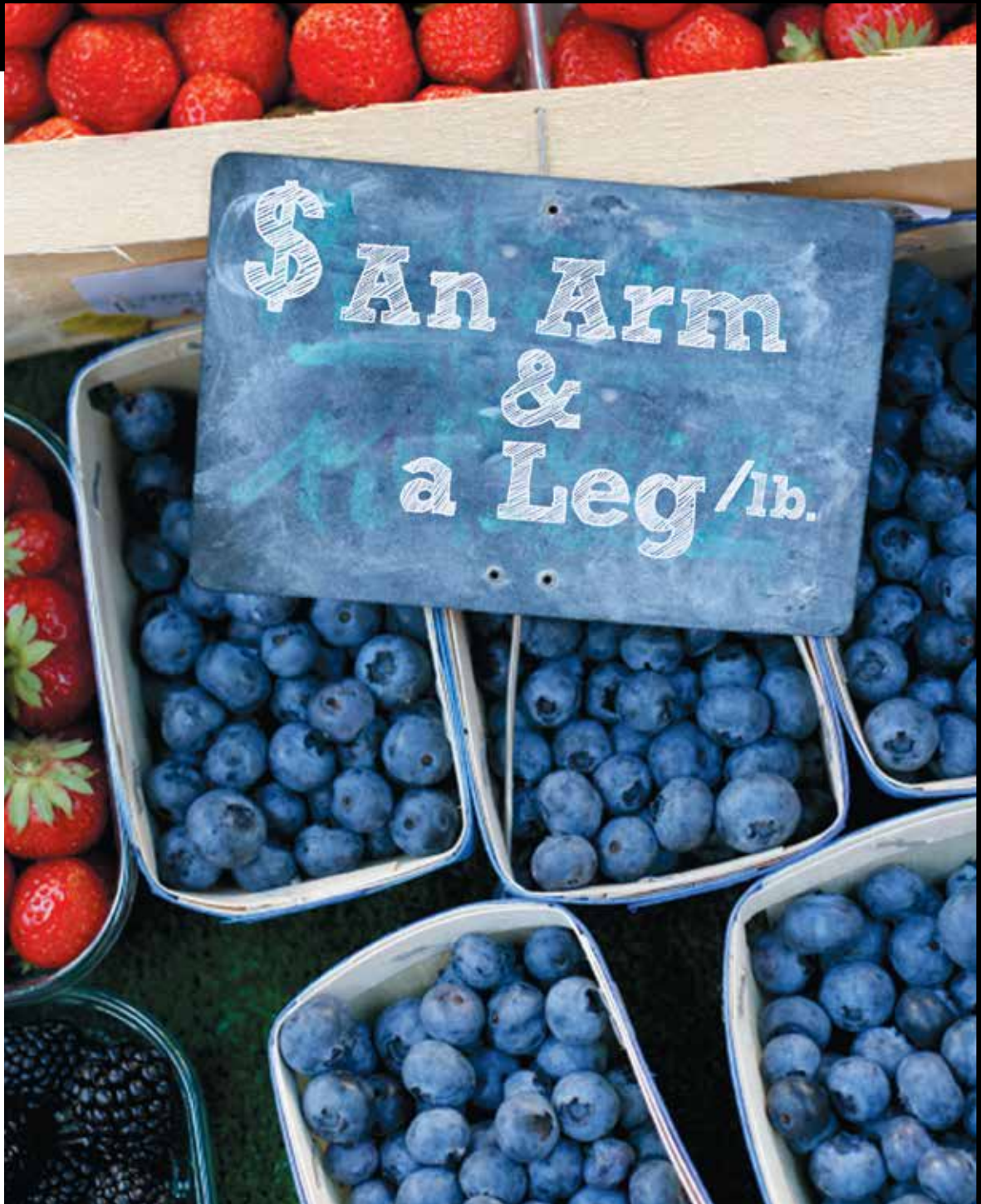
They do have wonderful phrases in the industry: *craveability*, *allure*, *mouthfeel*, *bliss point*. They hate the word *addiction*, of course.

CC Ultimately, we are the ones who decide what to buy and what to eat.

?



CC There's only so much that you can expect from companies; you can't expect them to make a product that isn't going to sell very well.



Now, you discuss how Kraft got too good at making products everyone craves, and you note that “the makers of processed foods have chosen, time and again, to double down on their efforts to dominate the American diet.” But isn’t that the goal of any big company—to become a key or even indispensable part of consumers’ daily lives?

Absolutely. And it’s critical to understand that. It’s a mistake to view these companies and their employees as evil or amoral. They’re doing what companies do: They’re making products that are appealing to people. And it’s critical for health-policy people to understand that, because there’s only so much that you can expect from companies; you can’t expect them to make a product that isn’t going to sell very well.

With that in mind, is it really fair to treat food companies’ branding and marketing efforts as somehow insidious?

The thing is, there’s something hallowed about food. Food is what keeps us alive and keeps the world going; it’s inherently supposed to make you *healthy*. So when you start linking something that’s supposed to make us healthy to obesity and diabetes and high blood pressure and even gout—which is surging right now in this country—then these ordinary, normal practices take on a new light. Increasingly, these companies are seen as having a greater responsibility—not just to shareholders but to consumers and public health.

It will be interesting looking forward: Is this an industry that can change from being beholden just to profit to one that can adopt a greater purpose? Maybe with some government encouragement, that could happen.

If people say they want more healthful food and then refuse to buy it, what can companies do? Why isn’t it sufficient for them to offer low-calorie alternatives alongside their regular products?

I’ve heard that before. But it’s the companies themselves that got us hooked on high levels of salt, sugar, and fat, and it’s a little disingenuous for them to say now that, well, people want these products.

But right now, as you note, Wall Street may be halting progress, but isn’t the reason investors complain because, when companies reduce salt and fat, sales slow? Is the real problem that consumers aren’t bucking their own impulses and tastes enough?

The solutions have to go hand in hand. There’s no question

that some of the responsibility for solving the problem rests in the hands of consumers. And we need to start with education: It was such an unfortunate and powerful thing when home economics fell by the wayside and kids were no longer taught how to shop and cook and eat healthily. Many kids now have no clue how to shop or to cook anything for themselves, and that has played into the hands of convenience and fast foods. We need to restart the home-economics program in schools, because you can’t just throw carrots and apples at kids and expect them to eat them in the lunchroom. When you engage them in a conversation about food, they get it. They’re smart. They want to be fit and strong.

There are points in the book at which consumers seem almost like helpless victims at the mercy of scientists and marketers at Mars and Coca-Cola.

I felt that way before doing this research—grocery stores are *minefields*, especially for someone who’s sensitive to salt. It’s almost impossible to find good products that aren’t heavily salted. But if nothing else, I’m hoping that this book helps empower people, simply by recognizing everything that the food companies are throwing at them, recognizing that the middle parts of the store are where the most heavily salt, sugar, and fat-laden products are. Ultimately, we are the ones who decide what to buy and what to eat, and that’s a powerful thing.

Of course, it’s difficult. When fresh blueberries cost so much more than a PowerBar or cereal, it’s really, really difficult, financially. And that’s where government and industry need to come in and level the playing field in terms of pricing. It’s one thing to know that you should be shopping in the fresh-vegetable section and another to look at the tab that you’re running up when adding those things to your grocery cart, compared to the less-expensive products in the center of the store. That’s a critical thing for food-policy people to solve.

Do you see a day of reckoning on the horizon, whether driven by consumer revolt or government crackdown or corporate initiative?

My sense is that the food giants are running scared right now—they’re worried that their customers are becoming concerned about nutrition and good health, and they’re worried about their own dependence on salt, sugar, and fat. I think they’re going to start scrambling and putting all kinds of energy and resources into doing innovative research to develop healthy products that will meet everybody’s needs and concerns. I think that’s what’s going to have to happen. ■