

A Most Convenient Childhood

The fried clams were the best. Howard Johnson's fried clams. No matter how deeply they were buried in the freezer drawer, under mounds of other frozen foods, I could spot their iconic orange and blue packaging. And with just that glimpse, I would sigh, knowing that somewhere in my future, nestled in that box, in a small aluminum foil tray, was heaven in the form battered delight.

My mother wouldn't let us eat clams every night. No, fried clams were saved for those few evenings that she and my father would go out. I'd like to think that her discretion was dictated by a concern over her then four children's health, that she read the nutrition label and thought the better of it. But there were no nutrition labels then - the federal government would not require them until 1973 - and I'm not sure she would have even glanced at them if there were. It wasn't a lack of affection for her kids - I think - but this, after all, was the woman who started every day with a bowlful of coffee ice cream and raspberry sherbet, with half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the side. Did she really care about home cooking and nutrient dense ingredients? Clearly not. But even my mom must have instinctively known that fried clams weren't satisfying much of anything but our young, sugar- and salt-jaded taste buds. I mean, wasn't that what made them so tasty from first bite?

I also doubt that the clams were a bribe of sorts or what my mother felt was a necessary distraction for us from the fact that our parents - our primary caregivers and presumably fierce protectors - would be out of reach for a while. Helicopter parents didn't exist back in the 60's so lack of close parental oversight was a given in our house. So I think didn't to be catered to, nor did we care. Or at least, I didn't. All that mattered was that once Mom and Dad were out the door, I could rip open the "Hojo's" box, peel back the tin foil lid, and tuck those scrumptious little curls into the 425 degrees oven. Then I'd wait, twenty-five interminable minutes, transfixed on the toaster oven's small window, while the clams' pale orange skins turned a delectable bronze. An enthusiastic dose of Heinz ketchup as garnish, seconds later, and my evening was set. Any sibling fights, any annoying babysitter barks like "I said get to bed!", all all melted away.

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Even if I had wanted to feed or bribe my own kids with Hojo's fried clam dinners in the late 90s when they were little, or today, when they are more likely to indulge Mom with a trip down Memory Lane, it would be impossible to do. Howard Johnson's had been the largest restaurant chain in the U.S. when I was a child in the 60s and 70s, with more than 1,000 combined company-owned and franchised outlets. According to Hojoland.com's history page, "In 1965, sales exceeded even those of McDonald's, Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken COMBINED!" (note the shared enthusiasm). In fact, HoJo's was second only to the United States Army as the largest food feeder in the country. But by the turn of this century, the franchise -

and its frozen food offerings that I loved and that had been almost as popular for home enjoyment at the time – had disappeared. From the looks of freezers at even the largest grocery stores in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where and when my husband and I raised our kids, so, too had America’s appetite for most battered fish delights.

Food historian, Laura Sampson, confirms the shifting landscape of kids’ “go to” cuisine over the past 50 years but adds that the allegedly sudden change from homemade goods to packaged foods was more myth than reality.

“The whole story of women slamming the kitchen doors and running into the arms of convenience foods that promised to make even the most ill-equipped chef a gourmet cook, was created and written by the advertising and food industry,” Shapiro explains. She says the transformation happened much more slowly and reluctantly. In the 60’s, the overwhelming majority of women were still doing home baking, for instance. And while supermarket shelves may have showcased increasingly processed and packaged foods, consumers had not yet fallen for the come on’s and the mouth-watering images with which US manufacturers hoped to lure them into changing their habits.

Shapiro cites one of many surveys conducted later in that decade that showed that not even working mothers, whose numbers were just beginning to rise, changed their ways. Perhaps most surprisingly, there was no significant difference between purchasing patterns for women, whether they were employed outside the home or not.


“Most women just plain old cooked,” Shapiro says matter-of-factly. “Maybe what they made was simpler. They might not have been good at it or enjoyed it, but they did cook.”

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Cooking is well known to have a multitude of benefits for the cook and the diner, alike. Multiple studies have demonstrated clear health benefits like fewer calories and more nutritional ingredients, that result in payback downstream such as weight loss, lower blood pressure and more energy.¹ Beyond the nutritional pluses, cooking can also be an act of love, selflessness, and altruism. Done collectively, it is known to create bonds. It is often therapeutic, emotional. Even in the most clinical of settings, like inpatient programs, so-called cooking interventions

¹ [Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act.](#) 2017; 14: 109.

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Frequency of eating home cooked meals and potential benefits for diet and health: cross-sectional analysis of a population-based cohort study
[Susanna Mills](#) ¹ [Heather Brown](#),¹ [Wendy Wrieden](#),² [Martin White](#),^{1,3} and [Jean Adams](#)³

have shown to “yield positive influences on socialization, self-esteem, quality of life, and affect.”² Aetna Insurance Company promotes it being good for your brain.³

My mother obviously didn’t subscribe to any of those schools of thought. Her intellectually frustrated brain was too busy pining for something other than kids or her kitchen, a need that could not be met by a quick fix like a smoke or an evening scotch. For in addition to those special nights with fried clams, our weekly meal plan was little more than one frozen option after another. My second in her repertoire: hands down, Swanson’s turkey TV dinner. Sad to say, they don’t call them TV dinners anymore. Online streaming and the demise of the Swanson’s brand have taken care of that. But according to company lore, Swanson’s turkey offering was its first media centric meal, artfully modeled after a traditional Thanksgiving so as to add that alluring dash of emotion and nostalgia to an otherwise utilitarian offering. The company’s marketing whiz, Gerry Thomas, dreamt up and applied the specific term “tv dinner” to the product, knowing it would appeal to Americans growing interest in convenience and tv viewing and, for years, he was right.⁴

I knew none of that back in the late 60’s. All I focused on was that moment when the kitchen timer would ding and I could pull out the tv-tray sized aluminum pan, scoop out the the mushy peas and overwhipped potatoes from their own snug compartments, and dump them onto the larger repository of washed out turkey meat. I would add a few spoonfuls of gravy from the tiny tin nest at the top, stir it all into one off-color stew and voila: a culinary masterpiece! Sodium be damned!

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Fact or fiction: when we become parents, we can’t help but mirror, in some ways, our own? I don’t know that there is an easy answer. As a young parent myself, I know I wanted to believe that my chosen path was wholly my own. Where I felt my dad had been too strict – no R-rated movies, no swearing, and god forbid, no opinions (he was the decider) – my husband and I chose to be looser. We were more present (our kids would say, for better or worse) - hardly helicopters, mind you, as my kids verbal punches like “the babysitter raised us!” still, to this day, point out.

Yet, I fear that in matters relating to cooking and eating, I fell into patterns, and made excuses, just like my mother had done. Daily lunch boxes and evening meals for three palates were like

² [Health Educ Behav](#). Author manuscript; available in PMC 2018 Apr 1.

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Psychosocial Benefits of Cooking Interventions: A Systematic Review

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³ <https://www.aetna.com/health-guide/health-benefits-of-home-cooking.html>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TV_dinner

vultures that loomed over me each day. My response? Just get something out there, make it look good and move on. Sure, at least, I worked full-time unlike my mom did (that's one rationale I would tell myself at the time). But, really, I didn't worry much and thought, well what's the harm, if Lunchables took the place of something warm. I grew up to be perfectly healthy. I kind of liked what I ate. Those foods of my childhood may not have rated nutritionally but they formed good memories – in fact, they were tantamount to family tradition – so why not pass those taste buds along?

It was likely in that spirit that in early October a few years into the new millennium, I wondered what could I share with my kids to give them a true flavor of their mother as child? , Without Hojo's or Swansons anywhere to be found, maybe some of the goodies my mother would allow?

So I headed for the snack that I screamed for most during the cooler months: Mallomars, those scrumptious, chewy yet crunchy, three layered cookies, that combine a graham crust, and a marshmallow middle, with a thin chocolate coat wrapping everything within. But none of them bit. What was wrong with them that they could not fathom why thousands of Americans hoarded the neatly packaged bits of ecstasy every December, knowing the manufacturer, Nabisco, wouldn't put them back on the shelf until the following Fall?⁵ Weren't they impressed by Mallomar's appearance in the movie "Harry Met Sally?" Or better yet, by Tony Soprano's affection for his own treasured box of the same? Didn't they remember Tony's exchange with Pauli: "Sunday, my house, box of mallomars on the counter? Fuckin empty. You think I don't know it was you?...I'm kiddin you, you fuck....Fuckin mallomars I thought you lost your mind."

How had they missed that those dark brown wonders of delight marked one century of greatness in 2013? Didn't that, at least, deserve a little respect? After all, my beloved, now microwavable favorite (15-20 seconds on high and the top layers go gooey, making it melt in your mouth in one bite), was just one year younger than their snackable amour, the boring, although admittedly, twistable biscuit, the Oreo.⁶

I gave up. It was on to plan B: Sno Balls!

Blogging foodie and Hostess brand devotee, David Leite, notes that Sno Balls came to be in 1947, part of the country's post-war, post-rationing desire for sugar and sweet snacks.⁷ Much

⁵ Talk about the ultimate marketing ploy. Artificial supply disruptions typically increase demand, a tactic Disney and others picked up on soon enough, as well.

⁶ For a more complete love letter to Mallomars, see New York Times author James Barron's 2005 ode. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/08/nyregion/the-cookie-that-comes-out-in-the-cold.html>

⁷ <https://leitesculinaria.com/10038/writings-pink-sno-balls.html>

like its cookie cousin, the Mallomar, Sno Balls were multi-layered confections, built around a white, cream center (not exactly real cream which is notably absent from the ingredient list), cloaked in spongy chocolate cake. The final and most notable touch, though, was a finishing coat of Instagrammably pink marshmallow⁸, sprinkled with similarly dyed coconut flakes. I never liked coconut – I still don't - but I loved Mallomars. The high fructose content was a given, but the give and the take of the texture as my teeth drove through to the cream, that is what sent me skyward. There was nothing like it. And to top it off, literally and figuratively, where else could you find such a vibrant pink anywhere else in the store? It spoke to my girlhood, and to what there was of my inner flirt at the time. Surely, my offspring would be genetically wired to enjoy this.

Imagine my surprise then, that with these images still swirling in the back of my mind, I turned up aisle five of my market a few days later and – whoa, what was that? A whole box of Sno Balls, there on the right, sitting alone, crying to me for attention! Okay, so the color was off - a new-fangled light purple that Hostess claimed was “fun”, but which I knew meant they needed to expand choices to boost sales - but I positively giggled to myself and didn't pause as I grabbed the box and headed for the door.

From the picture on front, the fuzzy little balls sure looked the same. And Hostess promised “same great taste!” Who was I to question the brand I so loved? So that night after dinner, I surprised my crew with that I told them would be a very special dessert and brought out five of the six individually wrapped cakes from the box. They each looked a bit suspicious and there were plenty of questions. Was I kidding? What was this? And as if to remind me that they were older and bigger, but still my children, a quick refrain of “do I have to?” came from each of their mouths.

Just to be a good role model, I took the first bite and grinned as I did, letting them know that there was something worthwhile inside. I chewed through the gooey exterior, leaving purple bits on my face as I bit down, further into the unnaturally moist, chocolatey cake, while my tongue searched for the cream at the core. It was like being a kid again, my taste buds all dancing, my mouth working overtime, with cream oozing from the side of my lips.

They all followed my lead if not my delight. Quick bite here, a nibble there, followed by wrinkled noses and unimpressed shrugs and grunts of “it's okay”. No swooning, no romantic asides? None of them came close to finishing their Sno Balls and it's a small wonder I didn't do it for them. As they trooped out of the room, and toward the tv, I looked sadly at the pile left behind. I had clearly failed as a parent to pass along the passion and the enjoyment of the fine food traditions that marked my own childhood. I had broken the chain of culinary lineage that had been bequeathed to me by my cooking averse, misplaced academic of a mother who saw sugar as a necessary elixir to keep her own growing brood quiet if not docile for a time.

⁸ According to Dave Leite, in a manufacturing error, the Los Angeles market had its own shade of pink marshmallow. True to LALA Land's reputation for excess, it was even pinker and more neon. It remains so today.

ROLE OF Nutrition

Yes, sugar played a starring role in my mother's menu plan, too. Various forms of fructose were the highlight of my early years – from cereals like Frosted Flakes and Fruit Loops, short-term fads like Quisp and Quake, to Pop Tarts briefly after - the frosted kind, of course – and then Danish Go Rounds, oval shaped pastries, similar in flavors to pop tarts, but with more frosting – and, rapture – sprinkles to boot. Danish Go Rounds were introduced by Kellogg's in 1968 and were instantly popular. But sadly, for fans like me, they were pulled off the shelves only eight years later due to what the Daily Meal claims was their one fatal flaw: They broke too easily⁹. Thus, when the nation was celebrating the bicentennial, I mourned the breakfast hour until I discovered joy elsewhere, in their replacement, Morton's inappropriately named Honey Buns. Despite the fact that there probably wasn't a drop of honey anywhere near those icing-drenched wonders, they were sweet enough, so false claims aside, none of us – my dad included – let it get in our way.

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Sugar wasn't just central to my own upbringing; it lies at the very heart of our country's founding and agricultural heritage. According to the Center for Prevention, some blame the British Army's defeat during the Revolutionary War on the fact that the loyalists were distracted, trying to protect their precious sugar plantations. Sugar was tantamount to gold back then. When the U.S. Department of Agriculture was founded decades later, during the Civil War (1862), "a priority was to encourage sugar beet production and analyze different strains of beets for their sugar content."¹⁰ Americans wanted more as well.

Historian Shapiro says.....

According to a 2016 Pew research study¹¹, America's sweet tooth peaked in 1999, when each person consumed an average of just over 90 pounds of added caloric sweeteners a year. In

⁹ <https://www.thedailymeal.com/eat/if-you-grew-70s-you-ll-definitely-remember-these-foods-slideshow/slide-4>

¹⁰ <https://www.thecenterforprevention.com/news/a-wonderful-paper-about-sugar-from-our-friend-karen-witter>

¹¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/13/whats-on-your-table-how-americas-diet-has-changed-over-the-decades/>

layman's terms, that's almost 27 teaspoons a day. The report notes that sweetener use had dropped by 2014, to 23 teaspoons a day but it masked two important trends: the growing use of corn-derived sweeteners which made up almost half the market compared to a base of effectively zero in the 70s; and the increased reliance on noncaloric sweeteners, such as aspartame and stevia, which many professionals suggested were equally corrosive to the nation's health. To this day, Americans typically top the list internationally of per capita sweetener consumption.

The powerful sugar lobby and the country's insatiable taste buds notwithstanding, the federal government has tried – or, more appropriately, has been pushed and prodded - over the years to play at least a modest role in defining national standards for a healthy diet. In 1894, when the Department of Agriculture released its first nutrition recommendations in a *Farmer's Bulletin*, recommendations largely reflected priorities of the agricultural sector. But by 1916, nutritionist Caroline Hunt authored a set of guidelines for young children which included the first mention of food groups. Hunt included five food groups: milk, meat, poultry and eggs; cereals and grains; butter and fats; vegetables and fruits; and sweets. These guidelines were re-released in 1917 as recommendations for adults, with the admonition, "You need some food from each group every day – don't skip any."¹²

I am quite sure that my mother was not interested in, or knew little about, any federal guidelines when she was mired in the swamp of child rearing four, then five, pint-sized monsters. Given the times, if she listened to anyone at all it was probably post-World War II baby guru, Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose book *The Common Book of Baby and Child Care* (sounds like a prayer book to me!) reassured parents that the most important thing to do in raising kids was to trust your common sense.¹³ For my mom, the number one fan of Kraft caramels and chocolate sodas with coffee ice cream, the most sensible thing to do was to keep our mouths full and busy so that we were reasonably quiet. If it wasn't Sno Balls or Mallomars, whipped cream right out of the spray container or raw cookie dough would do. To this day, I remember sitting in the shopping cart with at least two of my brothers as we wheeled down the dairy aisle, erupting in anguished cries of "don't hit us again!" if she were to pass through without grabbing the red-capped Redi-Whip container. Desperate times, indeed, called for desperate measures.

and its attendant health consequences of obesity and diabetes are part of what drove Congress to create federal

¹² United States Department of Agriculture, "Choose Your Food Wisely," United States Food Leaflet No. 4 (Washington, 1917-18), MU Libraries Depository
[641.05 Un3u 1-2](#)

¹³ <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-dr-spocks-1779321>

Dr. Robert Lustig, Professor of Pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco and leading expert on neuroendocrinology and childhood obesity .

The earliest focus of dietary guidance was on food groups in a healthy diet, food safety, food storage, and ensuring that people get enough minerals and vitamins to prevent certain diseases that occur when a vitamin or mineral is lacking in the diet. As nutrition science evolved, there was greater recognition of how the diet can play a role in disease prevention and health promotion. In 1980, the first publication of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans was released. Since then, the Dietary Guidelines have become the cornerstone of Federal food and nutrition guidance.

<https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/about-dietary-guidelines/history-dietary-guidelines>

A turning point for nutrition guidance in the U.S. began in the 1970s with the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. This Committee came into existence as a bridge between interests in the Senate Agriculture Committee and the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. In its early years, the Senate Committee focused on programs designed to eliminate hunger, but more evidence linking diet to the “Nation’s killer diseases” was building and allowed the Senate Committee to expand its focus and investigate how nutrition related to the overall health of Americans. The Senate Committee indicated that:

- Healthy diets could play an important role in promoting health, increasing productivity, and reducing health care costs.
- The American diet has changed within the last 50 years, and people need guidance to improve their health through better nutrition.
- The government has a role to provide nutrition guidance to Americans and encourage the advancement of nutrition research and industry food reformulation.

In 1977, after years of discussion, scientific review, and debate, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, led by Senator George McGovern, released [*Dietary Goals for the United States*](#). The Dietary Goals recommended:

- To avoid overweight, consume only as much energy as is expended; if overweight, decrease energy intake and increase energy expenditure. • Increase the consumption of complex carbohydrates and “naturally occurring” sugars from about 28 percent of intake to about 48 percent of energy intake.

- Reduce the consumption of refined and processed sugars by about 45 percent to account for about 10 percent of total energy intake.

The Changing American Diet.

Brewster, Letitia; Jacobson, Michael F.

Manufacturers who take advantage of consumers' need for convenience – promote high margin products – maximize sales by targeting ads and placement of product

Greater affluence = more eating out

On rare occasions, my mother would try something with an international twist, generally straight from a can. Chop suey was big. So was pasta. Or what passed for pasta. I haven't seen Chef Boyardee in years but I can only imagine that he hasn't aged, and his special sauce still tastes like sour ketchup. I am sure that it still smells the same, which is to say not appetizing. But at the time, a slice of Wonder bread laced with a few pats of firm butter (likely margarine) and it was all passable.

Breakfast, that all important first meal of the day, was no more home grown. Sugared cereals

I have no recollection of feeling neglected over the mindlessness with which these meals were prepared, nor the inattentiveness with which my mother pushed them down the table, in my general direction. After all, most of my friends enjoyed much of the same. Laurie's mother was always on a diet so their frozen meals were Weight Watchers and only Weight Watchers. (Her father, fortunately, was an Oreo lover like me, so there was always adequate compensation close by.) I don't think Heather's mom produced more than a cold cut sandwich. But their house was always a draw thanks to a freezer full of the complete range of Friendly's ice cream. There were the basics, like chocolate, vanilla, chocolate chip, and coffee. But the best sellers were there too. Deep purple black raspberry. Sublime butter crunch, laced-with chewy toffee pieces that allowed us to prolong our collective rhapsody. We'd carefully carve around the rim, filling our oversized spoons with softening mounds of sugar-laden goodness. Over and over we'd go, digging further down with each circular pass, until we had excavated the edges to the

very bottom of the container, leaving a volcanic mound in the middle for another day. Or, more to the point, for Heather's poor younger sister.

Uninspired cuisine aside, I know our mothers loved us. Or at least I like to think they did. But given the times – the mid-to-late 60's and early 70's – they were also struggling with their roles (some more quietly and painfully than others). They were raised to be just wives and mothers. Or as my mother-in-law so tactfully put it years later: "we were born to be useless." Housework and cooking were skills they were expected to develop if not perfect. Whatever formal education they enjoyed was to be for the benefit of their husbands and for bon mots at the dinner party circuit.

So I can only imagine the promise of freedom that the arrival of frozen and canned foods must have dangled before them. Like drawing the Get Out of Jail card in Monopoly, they might suddenly be unshackled from their stoves. They could forego the piles of dishes in the sink. And maybe best of all, they might apply the ultimate mute button for their children's sniveling complaints of "yuck" and "I am not eating that." If Chun King could give them all of that, including some time of their own, the kitchen was his.

They always say that necessity is the Mother of Invention. I like to think that our mothers' need for some balance, some degree of autonomy – a little bit of early liberation – in their lives, gave them license to be mothers of a different sort: the Mothers of Convenience. It's an order that I happily signed on to – just ask my kids and husband - many years ago.