

Book Review

Pandora's Lunchbox:

How Processed Food Took Over the American Meal

By Melanie Warner

Reviewed by Cindy Russell, MD

Did you ever open a long-expired box of cookies and find they looked and smelled perfectly normal? You may have eaten them without any gastric distress at all. It might have made you wonder, however, what the true expiration of processed foods really is and why. When *New York Times* business reporter Melanie Warner began writing about the food industry, she pondered the same questions. Her journey into the processed food world commenced when she started saving a host of processed foods in her pantry. She found even after six years, much of her food collection remained more or less unaltered. She writes, “so eternal, so unappealing to the mold and bacteria that normally feast on ignored leftovers and baked goods.”

Melanie attended food conventions, taste-tested new “foods,” interviewed food scientists, and did in-depth research, eventually writing an entertaining and explosive primer valuable to anyone who eats, but especially working parents. She learns about the competing issues of shelf-life versus nutrition, and delves into the history and growth of processed foods. Particularly interesting is how Kraft developed its “pasteurized cheese loaf” in 1916, which was promoted as a product that could be “kept indefinitely without spoiling.” Begs the question, if bacteria can’t degrade it, what happens in your gut? Another intriguing finding was how cereal companies cleverly used six-year-olds to test-drive their sugary cereals. She notes marketing has been an important part of the food industry’s success.

We also learn that there are serious deficiencies when it comes to processed food regulations. No surprise there. The book is highly recommended, as the author unravels the stories of synthesized food, food science, and agriculture in an amusing and pleasing style that keeps you craving the next chapter. You learn just how far away we have traveled from the farm. A bag of potato chips may never be quite the same for you. I recommend reading the book anyway.