

SECTION 1: INNOVATION AND THE FOOD INDUSTRY

PREFACE

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When we think about innovation in the food industry, the subject of this general issue of *Innovation: Management, Policy and Practice*, we may not always reflect that processed foods have a relatively short history. Ten thousand years ago, humankind discovered that cooking previously inedible or even toxic foods made them edible. Hunter-gathering omnivores could be spared the time-consuming stress of roaming to find food by cooking some of these plant and animal products. Agriculture contributed greater convenience. Humans were able to grow grains, beans, potatoes and other crops quickly considered staples that could be stored, providing a ready, and high, source of calories, sparing time that could be used for building, trading, conquest and other activities that helped create civilisations. Convenience could be said to be a major early motivator of food-related innovation.

Some recent books (eg Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, 2007) have pointed out that many food-related innovations of convenience have not benefited human health. He says '...the endemic diseases of civilization arise directly from highly processed foods and refined grains; the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in huge monocultures; the superabundance of cheap calories of sugar and fat produced by modern agriculture; and the narrowing of...biological diversity...to a tiny handful of staple crops, notably wheat, corn, and soy that supply our diet.'

Since the Industrial Revolution, innovation has generally been perceived as desirable, nearly synonymous with 'progress' (that slippery word). But the intimacy of our relationship with food qualifies that perception. When I managed a 1200-participant food innovation foresighting exercise in 1999 for Australia's premier scientific research organisation, CSIRO, I was struck by how strongly ambivalent consumers were about food-related innovation in general and the food industry in particular. Rightly or wrongly, innovation in other industries I had worked with was rarely greeted with such emotion.

In this foresighting exercise – Project Cassandra as we called it – three categories of innovations introduced by food-related industries aroused the greatest controversy: first and foremost, the safety of processed foods had to be without question; second, respondents wanted accessible reassurance that food products were healthy; and third, there was an interesting, often age-related, tension between demands for meal access and preparation convenience on the one hand and product choice, ingredient 'purity' and low cost on the other. Many of the negative perceptions in the third category were associated with the consolidation of the food industry and concentration of power in the hands of fewer and larger retailers. An interesting theme emerged in many respondents' comments, that a kind of social and ethical awareness should be palpably associated with developing food products as a business.

As all consultative exercises should, Project Cassandra gave soapboxes to people with divergent views. Some were eager for more innovation, new product choices, less time in the kitchen, and greater flexibility in eating occasions. Others were frankly horrified by the prospect of science and industry ‘meddling’ with their foods. Food-related innovation concerns us all. This project raised the question for me of what kind of innovation model *should* be applied by the food industry. Certainly the overwhelming response by consumers asked to share their views (50% of invitees contributed, either via intensive focus groups or by completing a whopping 24 page questionnaire) convinced me that consumers very much wanted to be part of the debate.

Innovation in the food industry is a tough game, played out in an often tense arena where the regulations that aim to ensure our foods are safe and healthy are applied to scientific and technological developments, against an often contradictory backdrop of consumer concerns, worries and perceptions. Successful food-related innovations are the product of the tension between these forces. This special issue of *Innovation: Management, Policy & Practice* brings together perspectives of a number of food industry experts who focus on different facets of food-related innovation.

We have tried to represent these powerful forces by recruiting section editors with strong backgrounds in food-related technology (Profes-

sor Paul Moughan, Massey University), consumer concerns (Professor Christine Bruhn, University of California) and food safety and regulatory issues (Dr Elizabeth Szabo and Dr Patricia Desmarchelier, Chief Scientist of New South Wales Safe Food Authority and Theme Director for Food Safety at Food Science Australia, respectively). We tried very hard to recruit a food ethicist, but they appeared to be too heavily booked on book launch and conference circuits to have time to accept our invitation.

Some of the editors and authors in this issue are academics, as is often the case for this journal. However, some of the invited authors in the issue are industry professionals engaged in research and product development. The experiential and technical case studies and anecdotes they include provide an interesting contrast to the accessible, popular media focus of consumer studies and the theoretical literature review of what comprises innovation in industry in general.

Unanimity of views of authors about appropriate innovation models was never considered achievable (or indeed desirable). We offer in this issue, as innovation journals admittedly often do, a set of contributions that may help further our thinking about what the food industry should do and offer to be sustainable and to provide safe, healthy foods for us all. The time and thoughtful contributions of the section editors and all authors are gratefully acknowledged.

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