Introduction

Making and selling food is a precarious and complex business. Markets for food are constantly in flux. Farmers and fishers strive in vain for uniformity of production as they confront seasonality and shifting weather patterns. Consumers transform their diets rapidly in the face of news reports on health benefits or risks. Moreover, markets for food are invested with layers of cultural significance: notions of authenticity vie with fears of risk; concerns about health trigger dietary restrictions; and factors of gender, class, and ethnic identity determine the desirability and content of meals. These concerns and thousands of others only tangentially related to commercial value accompany every forkful.¹

Given the complexity involved in producing and marketing even the most mundane foodstuffs, historical studies of food, business, and technology are of necessity diverse. At least three specific historiographical themes stand out, however, as particularly productive areas of inquiry and debate over the past twenty years. First, the food business has long been a central area of technological innovation, often cross-fertilizing with other sectors of capitalist enterprise far removed from farm fields or dinner tables. Second, histories of food and technology often provide deep insights into the environmental impacts and economic geography of rural–urban relations. Third, food has always been intensely politicized, meaning that its production, marketing, and consumption have historically functioned at the center of government interactions with private enterprise.

First, technological innovation has attracted considerable attention from historians of food industries. Historians of agriculture, for example,

have explored in great detail how individual inventors, corporate research and development teams, and state research agencies developed technologies to boost food and fiber output. Business enterprises geared toward mechanizing agricultural practices have developed new technologies, networks of knowledge, and business strategies that feed into other industrial sectors. The role of Cyrus McCormick’s reaper in the rise of mass production and distribution is a case in point. Such studies of primary food production forcefully demonstrate that the history of industrialization cannot be confined to the urban manufacturing core.

Recent histories of innovation move further downstream in the food economy, reflecting the shift of economic resources and rewards from farm to factory over the course of the past two centuries. In capitalist economies in which relatively small proportions of the population engage in producing food, the business of processing, preserving, packaging, and marketing foodstuffs attracts larger investments of capital and generally results in steadier returns than primary production on farms or at sea. In their pioneering study on agribusiness, Harvard Business School professors John H. Davis and Ray A. Goldberg determined that, in 1954, food processors accounted for 62 percent of all value added by economic activity within the broadly defined U.S. food sector, whereas farmers contributed only 21 percent (a near reversal of the ratio that existed in 1910). Beginning in the mid- to late nineteenth century, food processors, including meatpackers, canners, bakers, milk bottlers, condiment producers, and brewers developed technologies and business strategies for mass producing and distributing foodstuffs on national and global markets. Economies of scale and scope characterized several of these industries, as exemplified in the rise of the five largest meatpackers in the urban Midwest, which contributed to changes in industr-


4 John H. Davis and Ray A. Goldberg, A Concept of Agribusiness (Boston, 1957), 196.
trial labor relations, the expansion of national transportation networks, and the rise of mass consumer culture through the first half of the twentieth century. Food historian Harvey Levenstein has labeled the decades of the 1950s and 1960s the “golden age of food processing,” pointing to the rapid proliferation of branded convenience foods, such as Cheez Whiz and Swanson’s TV dinners, during those decades, but the technological transformation of the modern diet was well underway decades before the fish stick made its incursion into the American stomach. Most such transformations in the modern diet entailed technological innovations further downstream, particularly in the transportation, refrigeration, retailing, and home storage and preparation of food. The modern food chain, as scholars have recently explored in detail, is utterly dependent upon seemingly mundane, yet world-changing, technologies, such as manufactured ice, refrigerated trucks, supermarket display cases, telescoping shopping charts, home freezers, and microwaves.

Beyond innovation, technological change in the food industries also lends itself to a broad discussion of the geography and ecology of urban-rural relations. Environmental historians have been particularly attentive to the ways in which colonization, urbanization, and industrialization transformed human relations with the land and sea through new


modes of farming, hunting, fishing, and food processing. Food studies have become a cottage industry within social-science disciplines attuned to rural-urban relations, as economic and cultural geographers, ethnographers, and rural sociologists have produced a raft of articles, monographs, and edited volumes over the past two decades, exploring everything from the contested origins of rice in the colonial American South to the contemporary business of selling “fresh” food. One of the attractions of food for geographers and geographically inclined historians and sociologists is the opportunity it gives them to study the intersection of political economy with the natural environment. Food production, to a greater degree than other industrial enterprises, is inherently tied to place, beholden to weather and climate and soil type, and subject to seasonal fluctuations. Mapping the dynamics of capital and labor flows in the food economy, particularly on a global scale, has led to rich theoretical treatises on the nature (literally) of modern capitalism. Theoretically inclined scholars are not the only writers who have studied food chains in order to shine a light on the “creative destruction” at work in modern capitalism. The banal fact that most people are physi-


cally far removed from their food sources has recently made it possible for journalists and popular writers to achieve extraordinary book sales by exploiting consumers’ concerns over the “dark side” of their meals’ origins.11

The popularity of these modern-day muckraking tomes highlights the politicized nature of food, a third productive historiographical strand in studies of food, technology, and business. The thick layers of cultural meaning and social relations always embedded in the sale or use of food has meant that principles of moral economy and political economy have clashed with regularity and occasionally with force.12 Food riots were a regular feature of urban life until the early twentieth century, and have broken out periodically in recent years in response to spiking global food prices, but consumers and food producers in advanced industrial economies have, by and large, turned to regulatory governance since the nineteenth century to police the boundaries of fairness, trust, and purity in their food economies. Despite a longstanding focus by historians on the creation of pure food and drug laws in the United States during the Progressive Era, the site of regulatory governance has not always been the nation-state. Prior to the twentieth century, most such regulatory action occurred at a local or regional level, while the twentieth and twenty-first centuries witnessed corporations (often multinationals) or trade organizations taking a more assertive role in assuring food safety, promising environmental quality, or determining the “fair price” of a given commodity or foodstuff.13 Much work remains to be done in this realm, but the scholarship to date has produced

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11 Michael Pollan, The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (New York, 2006); Eric Schlosser, Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal (Boston, 2001); Ann Vileisis, Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get It Back (Washington, 2006); Steve Striffler, Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America’s Favorite Food (New Haven, 2005).


important insights into the ways that food has been caught in webs of contestation among private enterprises, organized consumers and producers, and governmental and private regulators.

The essays in this volume of *Business History Review* all explicitly deal with one or more of these three historiographical themes. Edward Beatty and Knut Sogner, though studying widely different arenas of innovation, nonetheless reveal the ways in which technologies for harvesting and distributing foods have emerged from contingent and complex interactions, rather than tracing an arc predetermined by the "logic" of managerial capitalism. Uwe Spiekermann’s case studies of two new food products introduced in twentieth-century Germany examine the flip side of innovation—that is, failure—highlighting a hidden irony in the modern food economy: namely, the vast majority of “new” food products are either minor transformations of familiar products or are so devoid of cultural value for would-be consumers that they fail to capture long-term market share. Mansel G. Blackford’s essay considers the interplay of environment and business enterprise in a world of finite fish stocks, demonstrating that nature can hold the power to dictate the transformation of capital, rather than always serving as the object of degradation, subjugation, or commodification. Finally, Andrew Godley and Bridget Williams address the issue of regulation and food safety in a politicized market, making the important point that food enterprises often seek to self-regulate food quality, not only to avoid government intervention but also to cultivate relations of trust with consumers. Taken as a whole, furthermore, the essays’ international perspectives enrich a field that is inherently global in scope.14 It is with great pleasure, then, that I introduce this special volume of *Business History Review* on the complex intersections of food, technological, and business history.

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