

In appreciation of Spam and Twinkies

Author pays tribute to beloved junk food

By **LARRY ROSENTHAL**
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New Haven — You won't find anything about sun-dried tomatoes, shiitake mushrooms, whole-grain breads and 100 percent pure fruit drinks in Carolyn Wyman's new food book.

She's interested in the foods that Americans eat most, like best and remember the fondest: from Spam and Twinkies to Jello-O, Kraft Macaroni & Cheese and Kool-Aid.

"We've forgotten that food is largely a pleasure, and not just a fuel," says Wyman, 37, a syndicated food columnist, journalist and author of "I'm a Spam Fan."

To Wyman, who says she practices what she preaches, living largely on a diet of convenience foods, junk food is a bit of a misnomer.

"I'd call it good old American cuisine," she says.

She prefers the title of "processed food enthusiast" over "junk food addict," although the license plate on her car reads: "JNKFO-D."

Processed foods get a bad rap, she says. For one, they are more consistent than anything nature has to offer.

"You buy a beautiful peach, it could be mushy and bad inside. You open a can of Spam, it's always good — whether you buy it in California or Rhode Island," she says, not entirely tongue-in-cheek.

Her book, published by Longmeadow Press, provides a glimpse into the history of more than 100 of America's favorite foods and the marketing geniuses often behind them.

Make fun of Spam all you want, she says. (World War II GI's certainly did, calling it "ham that didn't pass its physical.")

Fifty-six years after its creation, Spam remains the most popular canned meat on America's supermarket shelves; it's served in nearly 30 percent of all American households.

The pink brick of pork shoulder, ham and spices in a clear gelatin casing is the "quintessential processed food" because "it's like nothing you find in nature," Wyman says.

Its name was derived from taking the "Sp" from spiced and the "am" from ham. Her favorite recipe: Spam, baked beans and pineapple casserole.

Jell-O is also dear to Wyman's heart. She calls its success a tribute to American business and advertising.

"When you get down to essentials, Jell-O is basically the glutinous material from animal bone, skin and connective tissue combined with colored and flavored sugar," she writes in her book. "And yet, Jello-O is the savior of the sickroom and a major ingredient in more than 1,700 published recipes."

Jell-O also is America's largest-selling prepared dessert, she says.

An American inventor obtained the first patent on gelatin dessert in 1865. But it was a former carpenter, Pearl B. Wait of LeRoy, N.Y., who first saw its commercial possibilities and began peddling a version of it in 1897. Wait's wife gave the product its name, at a time when the sound "O" was a popular ending for food products.

Another favorite of Wyman's and millions of Americans: Kraft Macaroni & Cheese Dinner, a food product that is cheap, can sit on the shelf "until whenever you need it" and is easy to make.

"Who is immune to that special thrill when you pour the packet of dry cheese into the pan and the cooked noodles suddenly glisten with color?" she writes.

Kraft macaroni and cheese, introduced nationally in 1937, was an immediate success. But sales really took off when rationing was instituted during World War II, she writes. Today, Kraft sells 300 million boxes a year.

Twinkies, another staple of the junk-food crowd, were invented by James A. Dewar, a Hostess plant manager who saw the need for a new low-priced product during the Depression. The name was taken from a billboard ad for "Twinkle Toe Shoes" that Dewar and a friend spotted on a business trip.

The sponge-cake treats remain Continental Baking Co.'s best-selling item, Wyman writes, satisfying the sweetest sweet tooth with their sugar-enhanced creme filling.

And just how does the filling get inside? After the cakes are baked and cooled, it is forced in through three syringe-like air-fired injection tubes, she writes.

Among other pieces of food trivia in Wyman's book:

■ The divided aluminum tray in which Swanson TV dinners, the granddaddy of frozen dinners, made their debut in 1954 is now in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Swanson retired it from use in 1984 because it couldn't be used in the microwave.

■ Potato chips were invented by chef George Crum of Saratoga Springs, N.Y., as a way to get revenge on a disgruntled restaurant customer, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt had sent his french fries back one night in 1853 because they were too thick; Crum sent back a batch that were paper thin, and the rest is history. Potato chips remained a restaurant specialty until the advent of the mechanical potato peeler in the 1920s.

■ Pepsi was originally called Brad's Drink, after Caleb D. Bradham, a North Carolina pharmacist. He changed the name to Pepsi — after dyspepsia, or upset stomach, the ailment he claimed it could soothe. Pepsi's efforts to market the cola as the choice of a new generation started more than a generation ago, with ads in the early 1950s that spoke of "The Pepsi Generation."

■ Philadelphia Brand cream cheese originated in New York, and was only called Philadelphia to cash in on that city's reputation as the home of fine food products.

Wyman said people who love convenience foods have nothing to be ashamed of.

"I know I can't cook as good as Stouffer's. A lot of other people can't either. But I'm willing to admit it—that's the difference," she said.