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BOOK REVIEWS

VISUALIZING TASTE: HOW BUSINESS CHANGED THE LOOK OF WHAT YOU EAT, AI HISANO (2019)

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 336 pp., p/bk, \$39.50
ISBN 978-0-67498-389-2

Reviewed by Claus-Christian Carbon, University of Bamberg

This book is a real treasure if you are interested in colours and how colours were the target of business interests when food producers started to become the so-called 'food industry'. Ai Hisano, the author of this knowledgeable book, is a senior lecturer at the Graduate School of Economics at Kyoto University, Japan. She is the winner of the Wilbur Owen Sypherd Prize and has been Newcomen postdoctoral fellow in business history at Harvard Business School. Most importantly, Hisano is an expert on the food-colouring business, the development of transparent packaging and food marketing.

The book follows a clear rationale: colour played an eminent role in defining food standards and narrowing food varieties. This is an appealing approach because most readers might have overlooked this kind of standardization and the strong impact colour has on product appearance and identity. The story about the history of colour in the standardization process starts in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when exotic foods arrived in northern cities. The book focuses on such developments and the cultural resonance of colour in the United States. Europe, mainly Germany and France, is also mentioned when the author refers to crucial technologies in the food sector. This geographical focus is perfectly justifiable, even if we might overlook some parallels or counter-developments in other cultural areas of the world because the picture drawn from the US perspective is so rich and vivid, allowing us to dive deep into the market logic in one of the leading trendsetters in food industries. This deep level of understanding of the US case helps the reader to successfully translate these dynamics into other regions and markets.

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The author does not only inform about key mechanisms of food industries and their creative efforts to maximize market success; again and again, the reader is veritably astounded by how far-reaching the impact of strategic colour usage was on consumers' associations and preferences. For instance, who is really aware of red bananas? They had a market share of about 50 per cent before the industries decided to go for yellow bananas on a very rational basis: yellow bananas have not only better properties for storage and transport, but bananas with a consistent colour (yellow) can also be branded much more effectively than a variety of bananas with very different attributes. How such strategic decisions killed diversity in forms, colour and even taste (the red bananas were probably superior in taste) has been a mostly unwritten story.

Another fact will fascinate many readers: as long as unique colours were hard to achieve for products, the food industry tried to boost colour saturation and colour clarity, but with the advent of ecological concerns and market saturation of industrialized products, people started to enjoy the diversity of flawed colours. While early consumers were fooled about 'natural' colours by adding colour additives making them believe that, e.g., butter in winter times – and especially margarine – is yellowish, nowadays consumers are tricked with the addition of brownish colour tones that nudge them to associate products with more natural and wholesome qualities. We learn that market preferences follow proper cycles. There were times when colour was added to food in order to make products more natural, and so, more desirable. There were also times when colour was purposefully added to mark groceries as non-natural to prevent consumers of purchasing them. Could you believe that margarine was once forced to be coloured pink to make it more *unattractive*? We indeed learn that there was a 'pink law' in several US federal states in the late nineteenth century to protect the butter industry from the competition of margarine producers. It took ten whole years and the power of the US Supreme Court to suspend this rule.

Is it possible to ship and to store oranges? Is an orange-colour orange perfectly ripe, tasty and juicy or already overripe or even rotten? The colour will tell you, we might think. But colour can be modified, and it actually was during the modern trading of oranges. Whereas oranges from Florida often showed a greenish hue and, thus, were harder to sell, California's Navelinas and Valencias conformed more the consumers' expectations about oranges. How to cope with this situation? Oranges from Florida were dyed – actually, a common practice in the 1940s. This turned out to be successful until producers were forced to add a label on their artificially dyed fruits that stated 'Color Added'. Consumers now started to turn away from artificially coloured fruits because the explicit labelling made clear that the product was modified and producers shipped unwholesome products. First of all, this episode in the history of colour clarifies how important it is to explicitly state what ingredients are added to products that are not part of the natural components – informed consumers might decide against such products if they become aware of undesired practices. Secondly, the dark side of this story is even more telling: to comfort consumers, the market reacted by narrowing the array of products and favouring clear orange-coloured oranges to the detriment of other varieties, which were traditionally planted in Florida and other orange-producing areas.

A book on colour might not be possible without colour plates illustrating the history of colours in the food industry. The author solves this with an intelligent solution: she does not only offer some beautiful historical ads in

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high-quality multi-colour printing, but also contrasts these images with black-and-white ads from a time before colour was used by default to illustrate the specific appeal colour might have had on consumers back in those times.

A new chapter could be added to future editions of the book, which explicitly addresses the scientifically tested impact of colour on taste, on preference and even on the willingness to pay higher prices for such products. In other words, the psychological side of food colour and colourizing food would also be important for a book that explicitly addresses the market aspects of food colour. The author implicitly points to this dimension all over the book, but due to its central importance a separate chapter on this topic would be appreciated.

Even without such a chapter, the book is very appealing and highlights not only the role and importance of colour for the food industry, but it is also a wonderful time journey through the eras of the early food industries, the beginning of food marketing, and the increasing professionalization of the creative industries. I enjoyed the reading from start to end, and the rich foot-notes and references help the reader dig deeply into the topic.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Claus-Christian Carbon studied psychology (Dipl.-Psych.), followed by philosophy (MA), both at University of Trier. He did his Ph.D. at Freie Universität Berlin and his 'Habilitation' at the University of Vienna. Currently, he holds a full professorship leading the Department of General Psychology and Methodology and the 'Forschungsgruppe EPAEG' – a research group devoted to enhancing the knowledge, methodology and enthusiasm in cognitive ergonomics, psychological aesthetics and Gestalt. He is editor-in-chief of the scientific journal *Art & Perception*; section editor of *Perception* and *i-Perception*; and associate editor of *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, *Journal of Perceptual Imaging*, *Leadership, Education and Personality* and *Advances in Cognitive Psychology*. He is fascinated by the topic of taste and experiencing taste by colour, also because as a beer sommelier he is confronted with such topics on a daily basis.

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