



Swallow This: Serving Up the Food Industry's Darkest Secrets

Joanna Blythman

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From the author of *What to Eat* and *Shopped*, a revelatory investigation into what really goes into the food we eat.

Even with 25 years experience as a journalist and investigator of the food chain, Joanna Blythman still felt she had unanswered questions about the food we consume every day. How 'natural' is the process for making a 'natural' flavouring? What, exactly, is modified starch, and why is it an ingredient in so many foods? What is done to pitta bread to make it stay 'fresh' for six months? And why, when you eat a supermarket salad, does the taste linger in your mouth for several hours after?

Swallow This is a fascinating exploration of the food processing industry and its products – not just the more obvious ready meals, chicken nuggets and tinned soups, but the less overtly industrial – washed salads, smoothies, yoghurts, cereal bars, bread, fruit juice, prepared vegetables. Forget illegal, horse-meat-scandal processes, every step in the production of these is legal, but practised by a strange and inaccessible industry, with methods a world-away from our idea of domestic food preparation, and obscured by technical speak, unintelligible ingredients manuals, and clever labelling practices.

Determined to get to the bottom of the impact the industry has on our food, Joanna Blythman has gained unprecedented access to factories, suppliers and industry insiders, to give an utterly eye-opening account of what we're really swallowing.

Swallow This: Serving Up the Food Industry's Darkest Secrets Details

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From Reader Review Swallow This: Serving Up the Food Industry's Darkest Secrets for online ebook

Lisa says

Guess who prioritizes profits over consumer health. Everybody! Learn about some of the things that are done to our food, added to our food, surround our food, leach into our food, and render cheaper ingredients into inexpensively marketable "food." Bon appétit!

Alexandra says

I've read other books by Joanna Blythman and I respect her work usually, but this book has really annoyed me. She has visited the food manufacturing plants and tried to drill down in the ingredients in the shops and come to the conclusion that the food industry is taking us for a ride, selling us non foods. To a certain extent, I agree with that, but it is nowhere near as simple as she makes it. I don't think I can bring myself to read the whole book, but nowhere so far has she addressed the consumers' role in demanding these new foods. We spend less per capita of our household income on food than any other European country- we want quantity and variety, but we are not prepared to pay a fair amount for these foods and we are not prepared to take the time it takes to make these foods ourselves.

I live on a smallholding - I'm mainly plant based and grow a lot of my own food. I do keep a few chickens and eat some of the eggs. I do my own baking and cook my own dishes. It is very time consuming and it is not necessarily a cheap way to live, to buy good ingredients for the items I do need to buy. Most people would not be prepared to go to that effort.

But - previously - I had another life. I was a development chef in, what was at the time, the largest chilled food factory in Europe. Contrary to the info in this book, potatoes arrived covered in earth in containers - tonnes at a time and were processed through the potato plant. No one peeled them - there is a rumbler to do that- would you want to peel tonnes of potatoes? Even the eyes are taken out by machines. But those spuds were fresher than any you can buy usually and were cooked and cooled at optimum temperatures. Yes, we use different crumbs and batters in manufacturing for sure, but that is because breadcrumbs left coating a chicken in a CPET for a week would turn into mush. The ingredients need to be functional. If you want to buy a chicken kiev on Monday and eat it Friday, this is the price you, as the consumer will pay. If you want to buy croissants, fruit tart, fairy cakes and a sourdough loaf from an in store bakery and you think they are making all of those things from scratch everyday, you would have to be daft! And I can assure you, you would be paying a lot more for them. That's why a croissant from a French bakery costs at least double what you would pay here, even in a top flight supermarket. People don't want to do that. And where the author complains that a lot of the ingredients going into a food factory are already prepared and then in the next breath bemoans the product recalls and food safety issues - well, specialists process lemons in the country of origin because it is cheaper AND there is more traceability, therefore allowing a safer production environment. I'm not protecting the food industry - but we have asked for this cheap variety - they are providing it. Vote with your feet and things will change, but truthfully, I think people like their ready made carbonara and sticky toffee puddings and if you made them in the traditional way and tried to heat them up 6 days later, they probably wouldn't be safe and they wouldn't taste good. Factory procedures allow us that convenience. If you don't like it, make your own when you get home from work. But tell me, where did the bacon and eggs come from that you bought to put in your own version? Where is the pasta from? Is that real Parmesan? See, you can drill back as far as you like - at least they're not chucking in lead and plaster like the good old Victorian days. And OMG, if you make a soft fruit jam at home, you will need to add pectin -

otherwise it will never set!!!

I have never ranted about a book so much in my life - but really - try going without "manufactured" food for a week and see how you get on. Will you buy raw milk? Will you grow your own beans? What residues are in the soil of your garden? We have built our own food destiny - it will take decades to change, but it will HAVE to be consumer led and I think we are generally not prepared.

I can't deny there are some abominations dreamt up in factories though - chicken tikka pizza, anyone?

Heather says

A bit repetitive in parts, it could've been shorter and I was left longing for some sort of conclusion or advice but I really enjoyed the read and recommend it to all in order to educate yourself on what you're eating. It makes me want to never buy anything processed ever again.

Tocotin says

Bad Food Britain is one of my all-time favorite non-fiction books, so I was excited to read this one. Sadly, it's a disappointment for me. It lacks the richness and variety of sources, the human touch which made BFB so interesting and vivid. This book consists mostly of descriptions of various benign and not-so-benign food additives, hammering on and on about how ubiquitous and how overlooked they are, in a slightly too flippant style I didn't care much for. I appreciate the effort to explain some of the more hermetic chemical substances and the things they do – I'm not an expert and I don't know much about chemistry, I read this book mostly because I like food – but there were some things that raised my eyebrow, for example this:

“The third problematical ingredient is gelatin. It’s anathema to observant Muslims, Jews and vegetarians, and even secular omnivores may be wondering what this by-product of porcine hides is doing in their pudding.”

Gelatin has been used in cooking for the long time now, what is there to be wondering about? Also, it is sourced not only from pig skin, but also from other animals’ skin, bones, and connective tissues.

And I’m a bit surprised that this recently written book completely ignores veganism. Vegetarianism is so last century.

I read it awhile ago, so I don’t remember much about it, but it took me a long time to finish and yes, I didn’t enjoy it as much as I’d expected I would.

Fiona says

I bought this after seeing an excerpt in the GoodFood Magazine which sounded interesting. After a few days of it lying around on my footrest I decided to pick it up.

I wanted to know more about food and where it came from. Last year I gave up microwave or ready made meals and now we pretty much always cook from scratch, apart from a few cheats like Blue Dragon’s crispy chicken and sweet and sour sauce. It’s a jar of sweet and sour sauce which provides a batter mix for the

crispy chicken.

Now, my plan was to make real crispy chicken using a tempura mix and real sweet and sour sauce. Which I did – but the crispy chicken didn't really work at all. Maybe I got the batter wrong or it was the fact that I didn't get the oil to the right temperature. However the sauce was really nice. The only problem was – I got so het up about frying the chicken and heating up the oil that I totally forgot to make rice. What a dummy!

Anyway – the real sweet and sour sauce was really nice even if the chicken failed. I'll definitely be trying this recipe again. It is obviously by far more of a faff than mixing up a batter that has been designed not to fail and pouring a jar of sauce in a pan to heat up.

The point is that the Real Deal always tastes better, but there are some nights where you just want a decent meal with minimum fuss and that's not bad either – until you find out how much crap goes in there!

Swallow This is about processed food, how it is made and what goes in there. I thought it was going to be a lot more interesting than it was but it turned out to be a little obvious and the author began to irritate me with her attitude.

It felt that throughout that she was belittling people who didn't bake or their own bread, or had freshly made salads. Apparently shop bought salads left a bad taste in her mouth for hours. Really? Sure I guess having an absolutely fresh salad is always going to be better – but shop bought packet salads do not leave a bad taste in my mouth for hours. That is a pile of baloney.

Anytime she mentioned shop bought bread it was with the tone of withering disgust at this over industrialised sawdust or whatever she liked to refer it to as. Everyone knows how nice freshly baked bread tastes, it'd be nice to have it all the time but sometimes shop bought stuff will just have to do for most of us.

Then her horror at her discovery that even Marks and Spencer – yes, that's right MARKS & SPENCER the middle class haven for all things nice – do not actually bake their doughnuts or other 'freshly baked' goods in store. They like every other supermarket when it comes to bread and Danish pastries, get it ready made and just in need of being baked in an oven programmed to a pre-set temperature. Oh dear.

Her outrage of having after avoided the industrialised bread in a hotel, she discovered that her choice of fruit salad was not quite as fresh or 'safe' as she thought it to be. Well I don't need to be a food journalist to express surprise at that. Unless you go to a super nice hotel, I do not imagine that they have people chopping up fruit every morning. It's brought in ready prepared from somewhere else.

Lastly, the insinuation that her readers who she assumed would be part of those like herself, the 'we' who would only ever use wooden chopping boards because those cheaper and easier to store plastic chopping boards us plebs have to use are in fact poisoning us. How stupid of me.

I would not say that these irritations were heavy throughout the book, but they were there. I would have preferred to read a book written more in the line of informing people than expressing some kind of horror at every discovery.

The first half was a lot more interesting than the second half as it spoke about the process behind the foods. She managed to gate crash a convention of businesses that sold things like flavouring and additives. All this

stuff that goes into ready made food and take them apart and many of them are not edible in their original form.

The technical terms they used to describe things that you would hear no TV chef talk about was quite – humorous in a way. Products they added to certain foods that replaced ingredients like butter or eggs for example – were described as giving a good ‘mouthfeel’ – that feeling of having a good bulky mouthful. I guess without this stuff that cake in a box would be flatter and less substantial than a pancake dropped on the floor. The term ‘mouthfeel’ sort of encompasses the whole depressing state of processed food really. It is so far beyond what real cooking should feel like.

There are a surprising amount of processes and things added to your food that food companies do not have to put on the label. Since people are more aware of what rubbish is being added to foods, food manufacturers are trying to come up with ‘clean labels’ which do not contain too many scary long words. ‘Natural beetroot extract’ sound better than an e-number for instance.

The parts about food politics – how the sugar industry leaders are so powerful. Sugar is my big demon in life I admit – I have it in my tea and I like cake and jelly beans. However sugar is in everything nowadays due to the obsession with cutting out fat. It is all replaced with sugar, so much so it is hard to avoid. Trying to fight this though seems to be hard – the sugar industry seems to wield a lot of power.

I recently watched a documentary on this actually called Fed Up which was depressing and interesting, even if it was mostly about the American food industry. The body of people from the Sugar industry basically seem to have politicians by the balls. We can’t get rid of it.

However, by the second half of the book Blythman seems to have run out of stuff to say. It is broken off into chapters such as ‘Oily’ and ‘Packed’ etc where much of it starts to feel she is merely listing things that they put into foods to make it look better. It becomes just lists of words that mean very little. It became a little boring and I don’t think told me anything I hadn’t read before or could have guessed – without knowing the technical details.

Ultimately – cooking from scratch is better. We can’t do everything. Even Blythman admits that she cannot cure her own bacon and grinding her own flour is not really possible for her.

It is a little depressing to find out (or rather have confirmed) that avoiding processed food of any kind would be very difficult and to do so would probably be expensive and time consuming beyond what is possible for most working people or busy parents are capable of doing.

I can’t preach about food. Yes, we cook our own dinners but we aren’t healthy, we don’t eat enough vegetables probably or have a great balance. My breakfast choice is woefully processed and unhappy and my lunch time sandwiches are made on ready sliced white rolls. But we can’t all be perfect.

Is it better to cook yourself – never mind the health reasons – yes it is, it tastes better even if it takes longer. Not much longer really than heating something up in the oven for half an hour though. I’m not much of a cook – I follow simple recipes that are easy. I am not good at experimentation and we go for meals which are quick, easy and not too expensive. The most expensive thing occasionally being prawns. Yes, the boat is really being pushed out there.

This book is mildly interesting for the first half, mildly annoying at times but mostly kind of boing for the rest of it. Nothing shocking, nothing you couldn’t figure out yourself if you’re cynical enough that is.

One thing I did really like about this book – the feel of the paper and the deep inky smell was actually quite pleasing to physically read. The paper was sort of rough but good quality so felt very nice under the fingers. I do like that.

Zee Monodee says

My goodness, what an eye-opener about the world of processed food! If I'd have needed any convincing that we're all better off making our own food (and from scratch, too!), then this would've been the wake-up call! Almost everything that's processed or manufactured not by Nature is a truckload of chemical stuff and/or additions of stuff that has absolutely no logical reason (for consumers! Mind, for the producers, the reason is increased profit by using less costly ingredients!). You'll never look at pre-prepared, pre-packaged, pre-cooked, processed, ready-made food the same way ever again, and this is a must-read for anyone whose at the very least a little bit conscious of the food they are putting into their bodies.

Online Eccentric Librarian says

More reviews (and no fluff) on the blog <http://surrealtalvi.wordpress.com/>

With *Swallow this*, author Blythman presents a thoroughly researched and informative book on everything that goes into store bought or restaurant food (in other words, anything you didn't grow yourself). With a distinct EU/UK perspective, nearly every chemical (whether listed on a food label or not) is exhaustively researched, cataloged, and collected into intelligent groupings for easy reference. For the most part, shock tactics and *Exposé* histrionics are eschewed in favor of common sense observations, making for a more grounded piece. More interestingly, since Blythman is UK-based, this is a revealing book that shows the EU really isn't all that better than the US in controlling everything from GM to chemical additives that could be harmful or deadly through long term exposure.

The book breaks down as follows: Part One: How the processed food system works (why it all tastes the same, on the factory floor, clean label, at the food maker's market, fresh in store); Part Two: The defining characteristics of processed food (sweet, oily, flavored, colored, watery, starchy, tricky, old, packed). About 30% of the text is the carefully compiled references at the end.

Much of the book revolves around how preparation practices have changed to make food cheaper and last longer - often by replacing whole ingredients with chemical vestiges of the original or cheaper alternatives. Most revealing is not so much the chemicals themselves but the extraction methods that use very toxic chemicals (e.g., breaking milk down into 'milk proteins) to accomplish the purpose.

Also interesting was the last decade mission of manufacturers to 'clean labels' in order to turn chemical sounding ingredients into more palatable 'natural' sounding names. Those switches were eye opening; a 40 letter chemical name could often be turned into something more pleasant such as "rosemary extract", a chemical which really has nothing to do with rosemary but instead slows down the rate at which foods go rancid (e.g., a preservative).

Because the author went to specialized 'food fairs' that aren't open to the public (for obvious reasons), she

was able to obtain a lot of information on the chemicals that aren't listed on a label - those used in packaging (e.g., specialized chemical 'air' to keep produce fresher) or during the production process that are supposed to dissipate by the end. Even fresh food (e.g., lettuce), has a lot of chemical coatings by the time it reaches the produce section. Or 'fresh' baked bread at the supermarket arrived there frozen and just popped into an oven.

Swallow This presents an interesting quandry for the modern age and a topic that I would have liked to see addressed as well. To whit, without the chemicals and innovation that make food cheaper and last longer, how would we feed the global population? But at the same time, are we engineering our own destruction (cancer, diabetes, etc.), a 'prosperity plague' of the modern age? So while I am glad to read Blythman's book and understand more about what goes into the food I buy at the store, I wish the book wasn't such a one-sided indictment against the food industry. There is so much more to the topic. Reviewed from an advance reader copy provided by the publisher.

Justin says

For someone who already distrusts the food industry this didn't add much new.

I did learn that the prepared food section of a grocery store may be about as bad as packaged foods. Whole foods seems to be more transparent/better than other stores in this area, but I should remember to not quite trust their prepared foods either.

This is not without bias. For example, she announces with repulsion that there is calcium carbonate in a product. She says something to the effect that calcium carbonate comes from chalk. While this is trueish (it can come from a rock like limestone), calcium carbonate was added with the good intention of being a calcium source. I am not sure how horrible that is. Calcium carbonate is poorly absorbed but wikipedia doesn't seem too concerned about it's use (at least relative to other calcium sources).

The author also goes into food establishments and asks for food lists for all of their products and acts disgusted when they don't give it to her. It seems either foolish or aggressive to assume that a business would aid such a request (let me help you write your expose). Asking for one food at a time, explaining that you have allergies to numerous additives would be more likely to get a response and seem less antagonistic. It seems like the author can't get over her vitriol long enough to think this way.

All that being said, my guess is the food industry is as bad as depicted in the book if not occasionally worse. This is a great introduction to the topic and worth a read to those unfamiliar with it, just expect bias.

Jennet says

Anyone who eats food should read this book.

Karen Ross says

SWALLOW THIS is far more chilling than a Stephen King novel.

Her thesis is that the ready meal industry is more about speciality chemicals than it is about nutrition. Lots about how the industry is moving towards 'clean labels' i.e. the death of E numbers, which we all know are BAD, replaced by more benign descriptions, which are equally BAD.

When I finished reading the book, I immediately went to my fridge, freezer and cupboards, and started throwing things out. Even that catchy Marks & Spencer advert music is taking on a sinister note now . . .

If you cook from scratch, you don't need this book. (Try THERE'S ONLY TWO DAVID BECKHAMS instead; it's hugely funny.) If, on the other hand, you're seduced by the promise of the chill cabinet (and even, alas, the 'in-store bakery' offerings), it's a must-read.

Camille says

Recommended to anyone who is interested in where our food actually comes from.
Beware, it will put you off a lot of processed foods!

Andrea James says

I think I read books like these to keep me to cooking from scratch as often as possible.

As with most books in this genre, there is some sensationalist language but in the main it's reasonably readable and the author highlighted some points that I'd either forgotten or never known.

The biggest reminder for me is to question the apparently "clean" labels on products. There are things that food manufacturers have to include on their label and things (such as additives used in the processing of the ingredients but not added to the final product) that can be excluded.

Maru Kun says

Two events opened my eyes to the malign influence of neo-liberal ideology on the modern world and the concomitant growth of corporate power.

The first was the global financial crisis, proving that an unaccountable rent seeking financial services industry was intent on fattening itself out of our savings regardless of the consequences to the world economy.

The second was finding out that my 'Greek Style' yoghurt was not strained yoghurt but rather ordinary yoghurt with added starch. What a con. If you ever looked at a pot of "Greek Style" and "Greek" yoghurt side by side – as I did that fateful Sunday morning of political awakening - you would know the difference immediately. 'Greek Style' yoghurt still attracts a premium price over ordinary yoghurt despite being made of cheaper ingredients – milk plus starch rather than milk alone. This is what three decades of free market ideology has brought us.

So if, like me, you have ever wondered whether the processed food industry really had your best interests at heart this book will confirm your worst fears. The food industry cares about your health in the same way that the financial services industry cares about your retirement money – as a source of potential profit to squeeze like an extended shelf-life peach until a useless husk remains. “Swallow This” peels the plastic lid off the carton of microwavable, ready-to-eat mystery-meat-curry-for-one that is the British processed food industry and takes good sniff at the contents. It doesn’t smell good.

What are the common themes that run through every food processing technique the book examines? Health, flavor and food-safety perhaps? Miserliness, deception and profit maximization is more like it.

Miserliness involves replacing real food with cheaper alternatives at every opportunity. Every stage in the manufacture and distribution of processed food is a chance to fob-off the consumer by replacing what the home cook would call “food” with a cheaper substitute. This might be something to bulk up the product (water or starch), replace more expensive ingredients (Butter Buddies - taste forty times stronger than real butter at a fraction of the price) or cover up the resultant unappetizing mess (flavorings, colorings, enzymes, whatever).

Deception comes in many varieties: disguising the unappetizing result of industrial production with flavorings and colorings; “cleaning the label” – trying to replace E-numbers with so-called natural alternatives that you would never find outside a high tech chemical laboratory; extending shelf lives through the use of chemical coatings or inert atmospheres. The end result on the plate never looks like what’s on the packaging.

In the processed food industry words take on new meanings: “natural” means “extracted in bulk using industrial solvents from ingredients too low in quality for the supermarket”; “fresh” means “coated with nanoparticles and packaged under inert gas”.

Profit maximization is what it is all about. In food processing we have reached the absurd limits of the shareholder value movement: the only stakeholder that matters is the stockholder; consumer health is so low on the list of priorities as not to count. The most important contributor to the bottom line isn’t the chef but the political lobbyist.

Is escape from this world of industrial food production possible? It is becoming increasingly difficult given techniques reach all the way back to the orchard, and the meadow (or should I say the battery shed and the intensive feed lot).

A good first step is learning to cook. Take some care over your cookbook selection and search out some of the excellent YouTube cooking channels. Below are some I can recommend from personal experience. It’s taken me around two years to become a half decent home cook but if I can do it, anyone can:

The best Italian cookbook out there: *Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking*

Great recipes, so simple to do - there is a reason why this is in the James Beard Cookbook Hall of Fame: *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food*

FoodWishes on YouTube – Chef John is just a wonderful human being.

Good luck.

Kirsty says

In brief, the horrifying message of this book is: it's almost impossible to avoid artificial food ingredients, even if you're diligent about checking labels. Food processors are wise to this, and change the names of items to sound healthier, or add chemicals classed as 'processing aids' so they don't have to declare them on the label.

Kirsty says

I enjoyed this book and was shocked to discover how many things could be added to even relatively unprocessed food without featuring on the label.

However, I think the first half is more successful than the second. The chapter about enzymes seems to view added enzymes as a de facto bad thing (which they may or may not be), but in highlighting potential issues, there is no definitive issue identified (it is all this could be a problem) and also no mention is made of the fact that enzymes will naturally be involved in traditional food processes that rely on living organisms eg bread, cheese, alcohol and also in our food itself. In the chapter on chemicals, I thought too much was made of how bad things sound when using proper chemical names and names of reactions - I'm sure most long established traditional food production could be made to sound unappetising that way too.
