

Reframing Convenience Food



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Preface and Acknowledgements

What do we mean when we refer to convenience food? How do consumers make sense of the category? How do they combine it with other kinds of food and modes of cooking? How do they incorporate it into their everyday lives and what are its consequences in terms of public health and environmental sustainability? These are some of the questions that this book seeks to answer, challenging received wisdom, taken-for-granted ideas and common-sense assumptions about the topic. By rooting our understanding of convenience food in the mundane practices of everyday life, we seek to reframe the subject, questioning how the popularity and commercial success of convenience food can be reconciled with its conventional positioning as unhealthy and unsustainable. How to resolve this paradox lies at the heart of our suggested reframing of convenience food.

The research on which the book is based was funded under the FP7 ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme on sustainable food production and consumption (FP7-291766). The SUSFOOD programme aims to reinforce cooperation in research, development and innovation between EU members and associated States in order to maximize the contribution of research to the development of more sustainable food systems. The book was written during the Brexit process, when the UK was negotiating its departure from the EU. Working together has, however, only strengthened the authors' common commitment to collaborative working within

and beyond the European Research Area. We are also happy to acknowledge our gratitude to Nikola Schulz, the SUSFOOD project manager, to Annika Fuchs at the Federal Agency of Agriculture and Food (BLE) in Germany, and to our European funding partners: the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Germany (BMEL), the Danish Research Council (DASTI), the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) in the UK and the Swedish Research Council (FORMAS).

The book reports on four case studies (commercial baby food, supermarket ready meals, workplace canteen food and home-delivered meal boxes) all of which offer ease and convenience to consumers at different points in the cycle of planning, shopping, cooking, eating and clearing up. The research was undertaken in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK, by a multi-disciplinary research team with expertise in anthropology, geography, sociology and communications research. Our aim has been to work across the four countries and to integrate the case studies. Individual chapters may focus on one country and one kind of convenience food (such as supermarket ready meals in the UK or meal-box schemes in Denmark). But each chapter is organized thematically and includes comparative material from across the four cases with the aim of producing a genuinely integrated, international and interdisciplinary study.

Each chapter was initially drafted by one or two authors and they are credited here: the original version of Chap. 1 was drafted by Peter Jackson, Chap. 2 by Peter Jackson and Jonathan Everts, Chap. 3 by Bente Halkier, Chap. 4 by Helene Brembeck and Maria Fuentes, Chap. 5 by Jonathan Everts and Peter Jackson, Chap. 6 by Christine Wenzl and Jonathan Everts, Chap. 7 by Bente Halkier and Angela Meah, Chap. 8 by Angela Meah and Maria Fuentes, and Chaps. 9 and 10 by Peter Jackson. But, in each case, other authors contributed to successive drafts so that every chapter is multi-authored and the book is a truly collective endeavour.

Our collaboration was greatly enhanced by periodic writing workshops in Gothenburg, Mallorca and Sheffield where successive chapters were read and discussed, arguments were refined and new examples added prior to redrafting and recirculation. We also presented our work at several international meetings, sharing preliminary thoughts with each other, with invited discussants and wider audiences. The following

meetings were particularly productive and we would like to thank the organizers for creating the opportunity for open dialogue and lively debate: the Nordic Conference on Consumer Research meetings in Vaasa (2014) and Aarhus (2016) and the European Sociological Association meetings in Prague (2015) and Bologna (2016).

Finally, we would like to thank our home universities and academic departments for providing a stimulating and supportive environment for our research. These include: the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield where Peter Jackson and Angela Meah are based; the Centre for Consumer Science (CFK) at the University of Gothenburg where Helene Brembeck and Marie Fuentes are based; the Department of Communication at Roskilde University where Bente Halkier began the project and where Frej Daniel Hertz's doctoral research is based; the Department of Sociology at Copenhagen University to which Bente Halkier transferred in 2016; and the Department of Geography at the University of Bonn when Jonathan Everts began the project, before moving to Dresden and then to Halle Universities. Valerie Viehoff was also employed in Bonn while working in the UK and Germany, and Christine Wenzl's PhD research is based there. It is a measure of the openness of our academic communities and the porousness of disciplinary boundaries that several of us spent time at each other's institutions, sharing ideas and deepening our understanding of our four countries and their relationship with (different kinds of) convenience food. We are grateful for such collegiality and for all the opportunities we have been afforded in the process of working together. Our families also deserve our special thanks for enabling us to work on this project, including days spent away from home and hours working late. Thanks for the many ways you have enriched our lives and for making our work on this book more convenient.

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Introduction

Convenience food is a complex and contested category, whether understood as a marketing term used by retail professionals or in everyday conversation by non-specialists. It encompasses a wide variety of processed and semi-processed foods including frozen pizza and ready meals, sausages, sandwiches and pies, tinned fruit and canned vegetables, bagged salads, confectionary and crisps—all of which might broadly be described as ‘ready to cook, ready to heat or ready to eat’ (see Pfau and Saba 2009).

Despite these definitional issues (pursued in more detail in Chap. 3), convenience food is frequently criticised as unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable, responsible for eroding the distinctiveness of local food-ways as part of a wider process of cultural homogenization, sometimes referred to as McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993). For example, a study published in the *British Medical Journal* reported that none of the 100 ready meals it tested conformed to minimum WHO dietary standards (Howard et al. 2012),¹ while a report from the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs criticised convenience food for the inclusion of resource-intensive ingredients with high greenhouse gas emissions and heavy transport costs, consuming large volumes of energy, land and water (Defra 2012). In these circumstances, the use of convenience

food is often ‘tinged with moral disapprobation’ (Warde 1999, p. 518), particularly in comparison with ‘home-made’ food, cooked from scratch using fresh ingredients.

This book and the research project on which it is based questions this pejorative view, seeking to understand how various types of convenience food have become embedded in consumers’ lives, combined with other kinds of food to become part of their everyday diet. Seeking to understand the place of convenience food in people’s daily lives, we ask what lessons can be learned from the commercial success of convenience food that might be applied by those who seek to promote healthier and more sustainable diets? The project draws on original findings from comparative research in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK, funded through the ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme. The book argues that reframing convenience food within an understanding of everyday consumer practice provides new academic insights and helps avoid the all-too-frequent moralization of convenience food in policy and media circles.²

This introductory chapter outlines the complexity and contested nature of convenience food (cf. Jackson and Viehoff 2016). It introduces the research project on which the book is based including the rationale for our four case studies (commercial baby food, supermarket ready meals, workplace canteen food and meal-box schemes). It describes our theoretical and methodological approach, concluding with an outline of the book’s core argument.

Convenience Food as a Contested Category

Convenience food is a sprawling category that defies easy definition (Scholliers 2015). Given the lack of an agreed definition (explored further in Chap. 3), we could take various approaches to the topic. One would be to adopt the definitions used by our research participants, following the term wherever it takes us, as suggested by Gluck and Tsing’s (2009) approach to tracing ‘words-in-motion’. Alternatively, we might try to delimit the field and focus on specific types of convenience food (such as ready meals or frozen pizza). Our approach is somewhat different from either of these perspectives. Rather than seeking to arbitrate whether

some kinds of food should be included in the term while others should not, we have sought to trace how specific foods in particular circumstances come to be regarded as convenient (a process we describe using the neologism ‘conveniencization’). How, for example, does powdered baby milk (infant formula) come to be regarded as more convenient than breast milk? Where and when does this happen? Whose interests does it serve and whose does it marginalize or exclude? What commercial forces enable it to happen and what socio-technical innovations are involved in its development? Rather than taking ‘convenience food’ as a separate category of food whose meaning is settled and unchanging, we examine the processes and practices through which certain foods take on characteristics that are regarded (by some people in some places and at specific times) as ‘convenient’.

Our focus on ‘conveniencization’ (explained in more detail in Chap. 3) also enables us to explore how new forms of convenience food become normalized parts of people’s diets, regarded as staples within the practices of their everyday lives (cf. Lavelle et al. 2016). It also encourages us to explore how many households are able to combine ‘fresh’ and ‘convenience’ foods without making a strong distinction between the two categories (cf. Carrigan and Szmigin 2006; Short 2006). The process of ‘conveniencization’—and the distinction it implies between ‘convenient’ and ‘convenience’ food—is crucial for understanding what we mean by ‘reframing’ convenience food—and what is at stake in approaching the subject in this way.

The FOCAS Project

The research on which this book is based was funded by the ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme whose aim was to enhance collaboration and coordination between European research programmes on sustainable food production and consumption. The programme involved 25 partners from 16 European member states. The Call to which we responded addressed three thematic areas (with our project being associated with the third strand): increased resource efficiency in food production; innovation in food processing technologies; and understanding consumer behaviour to encourage more sustainable food choice.

Our project addressed the relationship between Food, Convenience and Sustainability (or FOCAS, for short). Its specific aims were to examine:

- How ‘convenience food’ is understood by consumers and how its use relates to understandings of ‘healthy eating’ and environmental sustainability
- With what specific practices (shopping, cooking, eating, disposing) ‘convenience food’ is associated
- How such foods are incorporated within different household contexts and domestic routines, and
- To what extent current practices are subject to change (towards more sustainable and healthier practices)?

We addressed these aims through four carefully-chosen case studies, each addressing different aspects of convenience food. The first case explored the consumption of **commercial baby food** among families with children aged under 18 months. Following debates on food safety, sustainability and health (Bentley 2014), the understanding of processed baby food as a modern, healthy and scientifically-based product has been questioned. This was particularly true in China, where the contamination of infant formula with the poisonous chemical melamine led to widespread parental anxieties about baby milk and led the dairy industry to adapt their marketing strategies (cf. Gong and Jackson 2012, 2013). Today, processed baby foods are marketed as a convenient and flexible solution for time-pressed mothers, meeting their needs while conforming to official health advice. However, elaborate packaging and long-distance transport, complex supply chains and changing dietary guidelines make the choice of baby food a vexing issue. Our research (led by Helene Brembeck and Maria Fuentes) was based in Sweden with some comparative work elsewhere in Europe including brands such as Semper in Sweden, Hipp in Germany, Ella’s Kitchen in the UK and Lovemade in Denmark. It included desk-based research on the marketing of various brands of baby food and field-based research among Swedish and Somali women in the small Swedish town of Falköping, exploring the role of processed food in baby-weaning practices as mothers sought to introduce their children to solid food. This

case study allowed us to test Alan Warde's (1999) claim that baby food is rarely marketed in terms of its convenience for babies or mothers.

The second case study, based in the UK but including comparative fieldwork in Germany (led by Peter Jackson, Angela Meah and Valerie Viehoff), looked at an iconic example of convenience food: **supermarket ready meals**, sold in frozen or chilled form, at numerous price points and with separate branded and own-label options. The research used interviews, kitchen 'go-alongs' and ethnographic observation with a diverse range of households in the UK and Germany to examine how consumers incorporate a range of convenience foods within their diets; the meanings attached to their consumption; and the scope for introducing healthier and more sustainable alternatives. We examined, in particular, the relationship between convenience and care (Meah and Jackson 2017) and associated ideas about food and family life, including the negative moralization of convenience food (explored in more depth in Chap. 7).

The third case, based on fieldwork in Germany (led by Jonathan Everts and Christine Wenzl), examines the communal provision of **workplace canteen food** where customers forego an element of choice in exchange for having their meals cooked for them. This case study began from the premise that many consumption 'choices' are not made by sovereign individuals but by institutional actors working on behalf of individual consumers. Constrained food choices are common in workplace canteens and other institutional settings where the range of food options may be quite restricted. In such cases, individual customers exert limited influence over the choice of ingredients, the sourcing of food or the way it is prepared. In these circumstances, the meaning of 'convenience' is likely to vary, as when eating in a canteen is regarded as less demanding than bringing food from home. While institutional catering may provide opportunities for 'choice editing' in support of health and sustainability agendas, it also reduces consumer choice (especially for those with 'minority' food preferences such as vegetarians or those who follow a halal or kosher diet).³ Canteen food also offers potential benefits in terms of collective procurement with possible advantages in terms of environmental sustainability (less packaging and waste, less reliance on individual journeys to shop etc.). The research for this case study was based in Euskirchen, a small town in a largely rural area, and Düren, a larger industrial town

in the North Rhine Westphalia region of Germany. Participatory observation involving informal conversations, ‘eat alongs’ and shared coffee breaks were held with guests and staff in eight canteen kitchens and dining rooms including a courthouse, two manufacturing companies, a vocational training centre, a hospital, bank, army base and town hall. Interviews, averaging 20–40 minutes, were conducted with three canteen managers, three chefs, three assistant cooks, a trainee and an intern. Interviews with guests were shorter, averaging 10–15 minutes, aiming to cover a wide range of social groups, including variations by gender, occupation and work tasks, religion and ethnicity.

The final case study (led by Bente Halkier and Frej Daniel Hertz) looked at **meal-box schemes** in Denmark. The research examined two specific schemes—*Ret Nemt* (‘Fairly Easy’) and *Årstiderne* (‘The Seasons’)—which made different claims regarding their healthiness and sustainability in terms of their use of organic and/or local products. This case study allowed us to test whether some degree of convenience (home delivery and carefully measured amounts of food suitable for specific recipes) was compatible with ideas of healthy home-cooking. Combining interviews, focus groups, participant observation and media reception analysis, around a dozen families with school-age children were studied in Denmark’s Zealand Region.⁴

While all of the case studies focused on a specific country, each had a comparative element, more developed in some cases than in others. We also made a specific decision to study small towns and provincial cities in contrast to the overwhelming metropolitan focus of existing food research (cf. Atkins et al. 2007; Franck 2005). While some might challenge our reliance on case studies in terms of the difficulty of generalizing from a narrow sample, we follow Mitchell (1983) in arguing that case and situation analysis depends on a different logic from statistical generalization (where large numbers of cases are required). Rather than relying on *statistical* inference, we deploy what Mitchell describes as *logical* inference where a single well-chosen case study can be more effective than large numbers of badly-drawn examples. Likewise, our selection of cases does not depend on a ‘sampling’ strategy where the aim is to reduce bias by identifying a representative sample. Rather, we deploy a process of maximum variation sampling, aiming for a diversity of cases and

maximizing the diversity of participants within each case study (Flyvbjerg 2001) as part of a constant comparative method (explained further in Chap. 3). Finally, the study was strongly interdisciplinary, drawing insights from anthropology, geography, sociology and communications research.

A 'Theories of Practice' Approach

The book adopts a 'theories of practice' approach to convenience food, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources, as outlined by Reckwitz (2002) and as discussed in relation to consumption studies by Warde (2005). Reckwitz defines a practice as 'a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (2002, p. 249).⁵ Specifically, we follow the work of Theodore Schatzki who argues that practices provide a conceptual middle ground between individual action and social order (Schatzki 2002). From this perspective, the unit of analysis is the practice—not individuals (who are the carriers of those practices) or structures (which only exist insofar as they are reproduced through practices). For Schatzki, practices are at the centre of the social world, constituting the 'site of the social' in conjunction with the material arrangements amidst and through which practices transpire. According to Schatzki (1996, p. 86), practices involve a nexus of 'doings and sayings', opening up a space for the observation of social practices as well as participants' discursive reflections on their practices. Practice theory also encourages us to examine how specific practices such as cooking and eating are negotiated within a wider set of domestic routines and responsibilities (cf. Wills et al. 2015; Warde 2016).

By employing a practice theory perspective, we emphasize that food is a process rather than a stable entity. Food is produced, packaged, distributed, bought, brought home, opened, prepared, cooked, served, eaten, digested and so on. Food has no meaning outside the practices and bodily processes of food production and consumption. It is for this reason that we chose to turn to practice theories when considering the categories of

convenience food and convenient foods. By resorting to practice theories, we acknowledge the importance of what people do and say. From this perspective, social phenomena such as convenience food are best understood as an outcome as well as an ingredient of social practices. In our case, and as stated above, we are interested not so much in the formal category of *convenience food* but in the multiple ways that different kinds of food are made *convenient*, through the process of *conveniencization* (see Chap. 3 for an elaboration of these terms).

Practice theories have been applied to a range of fields by Warde (2005), Shove and Pantzar (2005), Jackson and Everts (2010) and Halkier et al. (2011). In relation to food, early applications considered the practices of shopping for food (Jackson et al. 2006; Everts and Jackson 2009; Blake et al. 2010; Meah and Watson 2013). Practice theories have also been used in research on domestic kitchens and dining rooms (Wills et al. 2015), food provisioning (Jackson 2009), cooking (Meah and Jackson 2013), eating (Warde 2016), disposing of food (Evans 2012) and handling media-contested food routines (Halkier 2010).

Drawing on practice theory and with a focus on time pressures, time shifting and the competing demands on modern household schedules, Alan Warde (1999) recognised convenience food as a thought-provoking topic for social scientific analysis, while Jackson and Viehoff (2016) suggested that practice theories might help open up the study of convenience food for a more nuanced understanding of their uses and meanings in the context of everyday life.

Practice theory provides us with a common vocabulary and set of concepts to put to work in our case studies, emphasising the *meanings* that consumers attach to convenience food; the *practices* with which convenience food is associated; the *embeddedness* of convenience foods in the routines and rhythms of everyday life; and the ‘*do-ability*’ of convenience food in terms of its technical feasibility and cultural appropriateness (Halkier 2010). Practice theory also helps understand how consumers are recruited to specific practices associated with the use of convenience food; how such practices become routinized and habitual; how they are supported by specific forms of socio-technical apparatus and infrastructure; and how they involve particular kinds of skill and competence.

An Outline of the Book

Following this introduction, Chap. 2 traces the historical growth of consumer demand for various types of convenience food, acknowledging the significance of earlier forms of bottled, pickled and canned food but focusing on the period beginning in the 1950s with the development of the frozen TV dinner in the United States and contemporary European examples (including frozen, chilled and ambient products, branded and own-label). It discusses the variable market penetration of convenience food across Europe and examines the role of technological change including innovations in industrial food processing (such as the 'cold chain') and domestic technologies (such as refrigeration, home freezing and microwave cooking). The chapter also considers the role of supermarkets in shaping the routines of car-borne food shopping and changing gender relations and household structures (including the effects of increased female participation in the labour force and the growth of single-person households). The chapter ends with a more detailed account of the development of convenience food in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the UK.

Chapter 3 discusses the nature of convenience food as a complex and contested category, subject to multiple interpretations and diverse uses (cf. Halkier 2013). It explores the difficulties of translating 'convenience food' into other European languages besides English and how the category is used to refer, variously, to fast foods, snack foods and packaged/canned/frozen/pre-prepared foods. The chapter shows that convenience food is a contested category among academic researchers (who employ the concept as an analytical term) and among consumers (who use the term in everyday life). Drawing a distinction between 'convenience' food as a marketing category that applies to certain kinds of food and a wider range of foods that are rendered 'convenient' through specific consumer practices, the chapter advances our core concept of 'conveniencization' to refer to the process through which certain kinds of foods come to be recognised as more or less convenient than others. The chapter proposes an initial comparison of our four case studies in terms of heating, cooking and eating practices, examining what, where

and when foods are rendered convenient. We also propose a typology of how foods become convenient in terms of their acquisition, appropriation and appreciation.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how convenience foods have become incorporated within people's everyday routines and dietary practices including the way shopping and cooking convenience foods have been normalized. Examining historical and contemporary sources, the chapter shows how commercial baby food in Sweden has needed continuous work to reconcile its use with notions of being a 'good mother'. The chapter shows how certain practices associated with processed baby food are scripted (involving notions of prescription, de-inscription and re-inscription) in relation to advice from health authorities and other official bodies, or in response to marketing campaigns. Commercially-produced baby food is considered convenient in enabling parents (usually mothers) to feed their children in a variety of locations, at home and 'on the move'. While it is often regarded as an acceptable and modern way of infant feeding, based on ideologies of 'scientific motherhood', it can pose significant problems in terms of cultural appropriateness, given competing (idealized and highly gendered) ideologies about 'feeding the family'.

Chapter 5 outlines the complex temporalities of convenience food including long-term historical changes in technology and society, generational and life-course changes, and shorter-term changes such as treats and rewards. Drawing particularly on the ready meals case study, the chapter shows how convenience food has been employed to help resolve issues of scheduling and routinization, through time-saving and time-shifting strategies. More abstract temporalities are considered including ideas of 'being modern' and the role of food in various kinds of memory-work. The chapter also considers the tactic of 'stocking up' in anticipation of future needs (where convenience food plays a key role). Having considered the temporal practices involved in shopping, cooking and eating, the chapter provides a more systematic comparison of the transformations, rhythms and timings associated with convenience food, concluding with a discussion of how convenience food is caught up in processes of escalation (doing more things) and acceleration (doing things within a shorter time).

Drawing particularly on the case study of workplace canteens as a form of collective food provisioning, Chap. 6 explores the spatial organization of

convenience food. The chapter begins by considering the anxieties that are attached to the widening spaces of food production, distribution and retail, often described in terms of increasing ‘food miles’. More complex spatialities are then described including spatial relations, places and spatial change, offering an alternative framing of convenience food. The specific spatialities of canteen food are then addressed in terms of networks and circulation, food preparation, and eating spaces.

Chapter 7 discusses the moralization of convenience food showing how its negative evaluation frequently involves implicit or explicit comparison with other sorts of food, using fresh ingredients, cooked ‘from scratch’. The chapter demonstrates how convenience food is moralized through its associations with diet-related ill health, through deeply gendered ideas about maternal responsibility, and through arguments about the alleged decline of cooking skills (explored in more detail in Chap. 8). Convenience food is also caught up in contemporary debates about the responsabilization of consumers through notions of individualized ‘food choice’. Our empirical evidence shows how participants justified their use of convenience food in relation to ideas about sustainability and waste, eating on a budget, and the need to accommodate family members’ dietary tastes and preferences. Their frequent use of irony and self-deprecating humour highlights the moral ambivalence attached to convenience food. The chapter also challenges the common distinction between convenience and care, suggesting that the use of convenience food can be justified as an expression of care rather than as evidence of a dereliction of domestic duty.

Chapter 8 discusses the notion that the use of convenience food is associated with an alleged decline in cooking skills and culinary competence. Despite the popular ‘discourse of decline’ in media rhetoric and political debate, evidence for these assertions is actually rather limited, incomplete and out-dated. The chapter begins with some definitional issues, seeking to uncover what counts as ‘cooking’ in different contexts and how this has changed within living memory. Using the meal-box case study as the primary reference point, the chapter explores the skills associated with planned, improvised and audit-based approaches to cooking. It provides evidence of different forms of understanding including tacit knowledge, know-how and improvisation, concluding that meal-box schemes provide a convenient approach to meal planning while maintaining the positive values of home-cooking.

Chapter 9 reviews the implications of our study in terms of the health and sustainability of convenience food. It challenges the assumption that all convenience foods are unhealthy and unsustainable, countering deficit approaches which assume that consumers lack knowledge or skill regarding the food they consume. The chapter also challenges the view that consumers are unable to make connections between food and health or between food and the environment, exploring the reasons why consumer behaviour often departs from the 'best practice' encouraged by official advice on healthy eating or sustainable diets. Our research finds ample evidence of consumer interest in environmental questions, often expressed through the (academically contested) concept of 'food miles', as well as a general repugnance for wasting food (in contrast to the common assumption of consumer profligacy). The chapter also addresses the ethical trade-offs and practical compromises that surround the use of different kinds of convenience food.

The concluding chapter draws the argument together and offers suggestions for future research. It assesses the difference it makes to approach convenience food in terms of social practice theory and the insights that can be drawn from our comparative, international and interdisciplinary approach. The chapter highlights the analytical utility of the distinction we draw between 'convenience' and 'convenient' food and the value of our key concept of 'conveniencization'. Conclusions are provided at the level of the project as a whole and for each of our four cases, including a series of inferences about the relevance of our work for policy and practice. The chapter summarises the lessons learnt from our 'reframing' of convenience food through a social practice lens in terms of the health and environmental implications of current consumption practices and the potential for developing healthier and more sustainable alternatives.

Notes

1. Significantly, however, the same source (Howard et al. 2012) found that home-made meals, following recipes from TV chefs, were even less likely to meet WHO guidelines, challenging simple assumptions about the relative merits of 'home-made' and 'convenience' food.

2. This may be an appropriate point at which to note that our use of the term 'consumer' frames the subject in distinctive ways, denoting a particular, culturally, politically and historically-specific, relationship to the market (when buying or selling food and other goods). Where other words such as 'citizen', 'public' or 'parents' are more appropriate, these terms have been used instead. On the 'making' of the modern consumer, see Trentmann (2005).
3. The idea of 'choice editing' is discussed in an interview with Tim Lang in *The Guardian* ('Does the consumer really know best?', 25 October 2007).
4. Further details of the participants in each of the case studies are given in the Appendix.
5. Elsewhere, Shove et al. (2012) seek to understand the dynamics of social practice in terms of the interaction between meanings, materials and competences.



2

A Short History of Convenience Food

Introduction

This chapter traces the growth of consumer demand for various types of convenience food from the frozen TV dinner in 1950s America to contemporary European examples (including frozen, chilled and ambient products, branded and own-label). It discusses the variable market penetration of convenience food across Europe and examines the role of technological change including innovations in industrial food processing (such as the ‘cold chain’) and in domestic technologies (such as refrigeration and microwave cooking). The chapter also considers the role of supermarkets in shaping the routines of car-borne food shopping and changing gender relations and household structures (including the effects of increased female participation in the labour force and the growth of single-person households). The diversity of convenience food as a category in the marketing literature and in academic research will be discussed in more detail in Chap. 3.

The 'Prehistory' of Contemporary Convenience Food

As was argued in the Introduction, convenience food is a complex and contested category with a long history, spanning decades and perhaps even centuries if we take the development of canning, pickling and preserving into account as precursors of more recent kinds of convenience food such as frozen pizza or supermarket ready meals. In her recent history of processed baby food in the United States, for example, Amy Bentley traces the 'invention' of industrialized food products back to the 1930s when the Children's Bureau publication, *Infant Care*, first mentioned canned fruits and vegetables (2014, p. 17). But there is a much longer history of salted, dried, smoked, pickled, canned and preserved foods, many of which were invented to provide sustenance for the armed forces when in combat or on the move. So, for example, Nicolas Appert's experimental use of glass jars for preserving food took place during the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), the industrial-scale canning of pork and beans was prompted by the needs of the US army during the Civil War in the 1860s and, several decades later, during the First World War, the British army subsisted on tinned foods such as corned beef and Irish stew.

Some of the earliest forms of mass-produced convenience food such as condensed milk were already commercially available in the 1850s while canned goods, such as Heinz baked beans, were first sold in the UK in the 1880s. Nineteenth-century chemists such as Justus von Liebig were responsible for specific innovations, including the first patented recipes for infant formula (in the 1860s), while the double-seamed can which increased the shelf-life of food by means of an air-tight seal was invented in 1888 (as discussed by Shephard 2000).

Martin Bruegel provides a nuanced account of 'how the French learned to eat canned food' during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Bruegel 2002). Noting that canning technology was largely invented in France, he explores why it took almost a century before French consumers were convinced to use such foods. Describing their initial repugnance towards canned food, Bruegel also cites reasons of cost, taste and safety that slowed its widespread adoption in France. Eventually, it seems, it was

the army and the public school system that served as the conduit for the large-scale uptake of canned food during the First World War as these institutions provided a 'school for taste' that eventually led cans to become a routine presence in French households (*ibid.*, p. 125).¹

American Precedents

It was in the 1950s, however, that what might now be recognised as modern-day convenience foods first began to appear. Following some early experiments with serving frozen meals on US airlines in the 1940s, the first branded 'TV dinner' was produced by C.A. Swanson & Sons in the 1950s, in packaging that resembled a TV set, served in a segmented aluminium tray, ready for heating in the oven. In a series of iconic advertisements, Swanson's appealed to the needs of modern housewives. In one such image (see Fig. 2.1), a well-dressed woman returns home late from a shopping trip ready to prepare a hot meal for her husband ('I'm late—but dinner won't be!'). While her husband relaxes in an armchair with his newspaper, the woman smilingly sets about making dinner. The clock in the background and the glance at her watch, emphasise the time pressures she faces, balancing her domestic duties with her other commitments. The illustrator, Lucia Lerner, produced a series of similar adverts in the 1950s with captions that reflect the dynamics of contemporary family life: 'When you're painted into a corner at dinner time', 'How to catch the early, early show with an easy, easy dinner', 'Extra guest for dinner? You're ready for him'. The advertising copy (text and imagery) promotes the wholesomeness of the meal: 'lean, tender slices of beef' with 'three, not two, vegetables', squaring the circle of convenience and care offering 'oven-quick meals that taste home-cooked', 'with no work before, or dishes after', described as a 'comforting thought for a hurried housewife'.

In a similar vein, Amy Bentley suggests that American women welcomed the invention of industrialized baby food as a symbol of modernity and convenience, consistent with the precepts of 'scientific motherhood' (Apple 1987; see also Chap. 4). Anxious to provide a nutritious diet for their babies, processed baby food offered mothers the

**I'm late—
but dinner won't be!**

**Swanson TV Brand Dinners, the even-
quick meals that taste home-cooked**

Comforting thought for a hurried housewife: There's always time to put a hot, delicious meal on the table when you bring home even-quick Swanson TV Dinners. Each hearty dinner comes complete in its own heating-serving tray—is piping ready in 15 minutes or less, with no work before, no dishes after.

You needn't wait for an emergency, though, to enjoy all the convenience eating from TV Beef Dinners provide. Lean, tender slices of juicy beef... three, not two, vegetables: corn, peas in butter, buttered green peas, and tender, new potatoes in savory brown gravy. All with that old-fashioned, home-cooked flavor that only Swanson care and breeding give you. No wonder so many people find on many occasions to enjoy genuine Swanson TV Brand Dinners (beef, chicken, turkey and fish of haddock). Try them yourself.

**QUICK FROZER
BY SWANSON**

SWANSON

TV Dinners
MADE ONLY BY *Knappl* COOP COMPANY

SWANSON, INC.
Ad No. 4846—1 page—Knappl—P. 11 No. 100
Supplements, Dec. 1 and 8, 1957

Fig. 2.1 Advertisement for Swanson's TV dinners. Source: Swanson, from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/87362701@N00/234998824>

freedom and mobility they craved while firms like Gerber, Heinz and Beech-Nut provided assurances about the nutritionally balanced nature of their products. Not until the 1960s were concerns raised about the amount of salt, sugar and other additives in commercial baby food, with campaigners like Ralph Nader and critics such as Marion Nestle heralding a consumer backlash against the power of the food corporations leading to an increase in breastfeeding, later introduction of solid foods and more reliance on 'natural' (home-prepared) foods. Bentley concludes that commercial baby food's great popularity 'was always largely about convenience', reducing preparation time and allowing mothers greater mobility because of the portability of glass jars and, later, pouches (2014, p. 148). More worryingly, Bentley suggests, commercial baby food helped prime the infant palate for the kind of industrialized products, high in salt, fat and sugar, that are now associated with the 'obesity epidemic':

Commercial baby food was emblematic of mid-century American strength and power, complementing other such societal values as modernity and mobility. Its little jars of products laden with sugar, salt, and starch were gateway foods to the industrialized American diet ... Using them made mothers feel confident and modern, fueling capitalist enterprise and quelling more 'natural' ... alternatives, such as breastfeeding and homemade. (ibid., p. 163)

No less importantly, she concludes: 'Commercial baby food made it easier and more convenient for women with small children to enter the paid work force and stay there' (ibid., p. 163).

European Variations

The twentieth century saw a radical transformation of European kitchen spaces and cooking practices. The nineteenth-century kitchen was divided by class. Some bourgeois households could afford separate kitchens in the basement, operated by servants. For the rest of the population, coal or petroleum stoves within the living room (which was often the only room in the household) were the most common form of 'kitchen' (Oldenziel