

Pass the Olestra!

Confessions of a Fiesty Food Tester

By **CHRISTINE B. WHELAN**

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Natural foods are the fashion. Food technophobes dominate the headlines. Oprah Winfrey says she'll never eat another burger, and the meat industry quakes because millions of Americans listen. The food police tell us to stay away from additives, and Europe shudders at the thought of genetically altered vegetables.

Well, I am living proof that you should eat, drink and be wary -- wary of those who try to scare you about all the new foods on the market.

As a child, I was a guinea pig. You name it, I've eaten it -- before it even hit the supermarket. Food additives, fat substitutes, the more artificial the better. So while my friends poke doubtfully at the new fat-free potato chips, I've got to laugh. I've been eating this stuff since I was in the womb, and I'm doing just fine.

My mother is a public-health and food-safety specialist. When she was pregnant with me, a new sweetener was approved by the FDA. What would become Equal was simply called Equa, and wouldn't be available to the public for months. She got free samples delivered to her office and used it in her iced tea every day until I arrived -- a healthy, trim baby.

That was only the beginning.

The food industry is always coming out with new ways to make low-cal and no-cal foods. Even after the product is approved for human consumption, though, the paranoid quake in fear. Thus food companies send out samples to the movers and shakers of the health world -- politicians, analysts and even my sub-famous mother.

This testing process has taken differing forms over the years. In the early 1900s, Harvey Washington Wiley, an Agriculture Department chemist, read Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" -- about Chicago's less than fastidious meat-packing industry -- and decided America needed to test its food. Wiley found 12 healthy men, made them promise to eat nothing but what he fed them and anointed this lucky bunch "the poison squad."

These days we make rats do the heavy digesting, so by the time I got a new product it had been through all the red tape the FDA could string in its way. I wasn't a baby poison-squadder; I was more like a restaurant reviewer sampling cutting-edge fare. Tough childhood.

One of the most versatile (and short-lived) products ever to grace our kitchen was Monsanto-made Simplese, a fat substitute that took many forms. First there was the fat-free ice cream. We got several cases, in every flavor imaginable. It tasted like chalk and turned gooey after a week. We switched back to Häagen Dazs. The additive is now used as a "texturizer" -- to simulate the texture of fat -- in conjunction with other fat replacements in baked goods, ice creams and cheeses.

There were other Simplese-enhanced products that made it into our fridge. A 2-foot-tall barrel of Simplifier cream -- a fat-free basic white sauce -- arrived one day, looking like alfredo sauce without the guilt. Of course, this delight wasn't meant for household use; it came in restaurant-sized measurements, so we

had creamed everything for a month. Your local bistro may still swear by it because it is a great success at eateries.

Food inventions aren't limited to wanna-be fats. Calgene made the bioengineered tomato and it arrived at our door in 1993. My mother fell in love with these plump, red-as-August beauties and hosted a dinner party on their behalf. The guests oohed and ahed over the showcased veggie, which was taken off the market in 1997 because it did not travel well and may not return again. Irradiated strawberries were fun, too. As my friends teased me about my glowing personality, we happily left the strawberries in the crisper for weeks -- and no mold! The wonders of science.

In April 1996 I had my first bag of potato chips made with Olestra, a nondigestible fat. First we got Frito Lay's WOW! chips, and a few months later Pringles followed in all flavors imaginable. The warning on the bags promised every kind of possible unpleasantness, but it turns out to have had little basis in sound science, serving only to scare the weak-stomached away. Proctor & Gamble is rightly petitioning to have this gratuitous label removed.

The latest invention to pass across my palate arrived just last week. The new Veryfine juice made its way into our lives -- fruit juice without the high fructose (and calories). The creation is popularly called Splenda; its active ingredient is sucralose -- a synthetic sweetener -- and it is so wonderfully artificial that they've added vitamin C and calcium to the drink just for good measure. It isn't half bad.

I look forward to future technological delights, once they are approved. I'll be at the top of the list for Olestra mayonnaise and the bioengineered potato that doesn't absorb oil when you fry it. These new inventions are good news -- not fodder for fear. And keep in mind, we have been modifying our food since day one:

cooking, salting, pickling, garnishing and now chemically manipulating. It makes for better taste and better health.

"Everything in moderation," my mother told me. So I suppose you can always balance these new products with broccoli, if you feel you must.

Ms. Whelan is working at the Journal's editorial page this summer.