Laws won’t cure food addiction

By JAYSON LUSK*

Michael Moss’s New York Times bestselling book, Salt, Sugar, Fat: The Food Giants Hooked Us is the latest in a long stream of journalistic exposés decrying the state of food and agriculture in America. The work has been met with lauding praise. Although it initially drew the emerging cultural narrative about food, Moss’s book is overwrought. Moss reveals a shocking secret: Food manufacturers diligently and deliberately try to make foods we like to eat — foods that are alluring and tempting.

If food companies aren’t doing that, I’m not sure why they exist. What is the alternative? Regulate food companies to make un-tasty food?

Martha Stewart, Mark Bittman, and Paula Deen don’t explicitly refer to the science of “bliss points” in their kitchens, but you can bet they intuitively know how much sugar is too little and how much is too much. Their published recipes almost certainly reflect hundreds of attempts to find the ingredient combinations that taste good.

We expect nothing less from food companies, cookbook authors and restaurant chefs. We expect nothing less from authors and scientists.

Moss and I diligently and deliberately tried to write compelling, page-turning books with alluring covers designed by experts in the New York publishing business to attract consumers and tempt them to buy. We want the pleasure centers of our own brains to light up when we tell a good story or make a compelling turn of phrase.

For all the talk of scientific bliss points and allure to companies powerful enough to manipulate our taste buds, Moss inadvertently reveals how much food companies actually have to do. They spend hundreds of millions on advertising and promotion to try to convince us to buy their wares, yet all the flashy, well-crafted brand images and corporate logos reveal another truth: Without all this stuff, we’d probably just ignore them and their scientifically optimized foods.

There is a key contradiction underlying Moss’s work. In one instance, he asks a food executive, “What if some of these products are so tasty people can’t resist eating them?” Yet, elsewhere, he argues that taste isn’t a sufficiently powerful allure to keep us coming back for more.

After warning readers of how hard the “Food Giants” work at making great-tasting food, Moss lets us in on a secret: “The selling of food matters as much as the food itself. If it is not tasty, it is not a factor. In fact, he said the allure of the best-selling soft drink is “derived as much from what goes onto the can or bottle (as) what goes into it.”

Despite their supposed prowess in science and advertising, Moss barely alludes to the fact that food companies normally fail. However, his own statistics, offered in passing, reveal that two-thirds of all new food products fail to survive on the market after the first few months.

This isn’t a sideline fact; it is key evidence against his argument that food companies are in fact doing anything they want on gullible consumers.

Drug-like Addiction. Hooked. These are words that appeal to a twelve-step mentality. Moss’s book, however, calling salt, sugar and fat addictive is stretching the science to fit an agenda.

Is it really surprising to learn that sugar activates reward centers of our brain? Or that ice cream makes us happy? Using the studies cited to claim that sugar, salt and fat are addictive comes dangerously close to calling something pleasurable addictive.

If reading a good book or playing hard ball with the kids activates a brain reward center, then why, too, following this line of reasoning, are addictive? The argument is tantamount to demonizing pleasure. It is modern-day Puritanism, and it is demeaning to those who work at making legitimate addictions.

Ultimately, one wonders whether Moss even believes his addiction theme. He writes, “Some books... describe an agenda... that doesn’t occur. Ultimately, one wonders whether Moss even believes his addiction theme. He writes, “Some books... describe an agenda... that doesn’t occur. Ultimately, one wonders whether Moss even believes his addiction theme. He writes, “Some books... describe an agenda... that doesn’t occur. Ultimately, one wonders whether Moss even believes his addiction theme. He writes, “Some books... describe an agenda... that doesn’t occur.

Not to worry, whatever Moss’s book. However, calling salt, sugar and fat addictive is stretching the science to fit an agenda. “Unhooked” is a word scarcely uttered in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or among ex-smokers.

I suspect that Moss and I disagree about the value the average consumer derives from convenience and taste, and as a consequence, we are likely to have competing conceptualizations about the normative consequences of the changes in food brought about in the last 50 years and the desirability of government regulation aimed at reversing them.

There is, however, one sentiment of Moss’s that I can wholeheartedly endorse, and it is his last: “They may have salt, sugar and fat on their side, but we, ultimately, have the power to make choices. After all, we decide what to buy. We decide how much to eat. You want the Food Giants to sell healthier food, then buy their salads, wraps and low-fat alternatives.”

Pointing the finger at Food Giants may sell books, but it doesn’t absolve us of the responsibility to choose wisely for ourselves.


Free markets versus legislating ‘solutions’

There is an enduring tension in the food system that has been growingly prominent in recent years. We spend a lot of time navigating various issues that inherently arise because of a divergence of views, and because of our abundance, the tug-of-war is even more prevalent in the U.S.

One side cites a rapidly growing global population and the need to feed 9 billion people by 2050. That outlook invokes a focus on producing more food to ensure that people don’t go hungry.

The other side stresses more qualitative aspects (or the lack thereof), claiming that agriculture’s progress has come at a cost to the environment. Worry that agriculture has become a problem, is over-promoted, and overlooked key aspects of food production that should be prioritized, the end result being that food is too “industrialized” or “conglomerated.”

That’s all oversimplified; the world never neatly fits into these two camps. Nonetheless, it highlights the divergent perspectives about food and agriculture. Earlier this year, I quoted from an article (discussing the Beef Products Inc. versus ABC lawsuit) that encapsulated this friction: “The case also underscores an intensifying war between the farm sector and its critics over how food is made.” That’s a fairly concise summary about what’s going on out there.

All of this can become particularly contentious because it ultimately reflects our general worldview and associated responsibilities as citizens. Often, lots of suspicion is cast on the “other side,” their respective intentions and the influence they may have over the long run.

Not to worry, whatever your view, though. Debate is beneficial. The hard arises when one side wants to impose its values on the other. Both sides can be equally prone to imply that the world is coming to an end. That, to me, is the key to what agriculture continues as is, there will surely be ruin. Then, the answer always seems to be some type of legislation to ensure that that doesn’t occur.

Matt Ridley, author of The Rational Optimist, explained that assertions of calamity are always dependent on the conditional “if.” That is, if we do this, then the remaining on a path of irreversible disaster.

More important, Ridley also pointed out: “The world will not continue as it is. That is the whole point of human progress, the whole message of cultural evolution, the whole message of human, often, lots of suspicion is cast on the “other side,” their respective intentions and the influence they may have over the long run.

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