Book Review

Ai Hisano, *Visualizing Taste: How Business Changed the Look of What You Eat*

Greg de St. Maurice

In *Visualizing Taste: How Business Changed the Look of What You Eat* Ai Hisano studies how in the period from the 1870s to the 1970s the efforts of diverse actors—including food companies, agricultural producers, chemical companies, and the US government—created colors for foods that consumers in the US would eventually take for granted and come to consider natural. In *Visualizing Taste* Hisano turns her attention to foods as disparate as bananas, beef, cake mix, and Jell-O.

Visualizing Taste captures absurdities in American food culture, including some that are with us to this day. Hisano argues that what consumers in this period thought were colors for foods that indicated "freshness," "naturalness," and "healthfulness" were the result of actions by the business industry—including the use of new or improved technologies, new trends in corporate marketing, and related government regulation. Here she takes inspiration from Leo Marx's notion of "the machine in the garden," which points to the romanticization of pastoral ideals and untamed wilderness accompanied by industrial and commercial development. In the United States during this period, the colors of items like oranges and butter were altered in order to convey freshness, naturalness, and healthfulness even though this entailed adding ingredients or dyes, using new technology, and sometimes actually made the product harmful to human health.

This is a work of business history that explicitly focuses on the senses. Hisano goes further than merely looking at marketing techniques and studying

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the reception of certain products; she shows how the very products themselves were created in the context of a particular cultural economy with its own sensorial hierarchies and material possibilities.

The first chapter, Capitalism of the Senses, serves as the volume's introduction, outlining Hisano's aims and providing context for the chapters that follow. I found the following passage from the introduction, which explains one of the book's goals, striking:

> It is impossible to perceive exactly how late nineteenth-century consumers saw color advertisements. People at this time probably experienced very different visual sensations when they happened upon a color image, which occurred much less often than it does in our modern rainbow world. Until the 1920s, popular magazines included few color images (one or two in each issue, if any). When I came across a color page in a magazine from the late nineteenth century in the research for this book, it was quite stunning. The color that beamed into my eyes after turning dozens of all black-and-white pages was unique, exciting, and astonishing. It is difficult to understand the significance of each image without understanding its context. I hope that my text will convey the historical and social contexts in which people first saw these images [16-17].

As archaeologists and historians interested in the senses will attest, studying the sensory realities of other eras is a challenge. Yet Hisano is attuned to how someone in the US in the late 19th century might have responded to the world differently than many of us do.

The second chapter, Food and Modern Visual Culture, offers a fascinating historical account of the development of scientific color classification and its commercial application. The example that perhaps best conveys the content of this chapter is the color system created by Alfred Munsell in 1905. Originally intended to standardize the teaching of color to children, this resource charts hues that vary according to value (lighter to darker) and chroma (less to more saturated). Munsell's work, still in use today, was quickly adopted

for commercial purposes, including by food and agricultural companies. Hisano explains how the Munsell color system and similar classification systems were used not only to standardize discussions of an actual food's color but to establish standards for the "right" colors for specific foods, not only for marketing purposes but for production too.

Chapter Three, The Color of Dye, looks at the repercussions of the fabrication of synthetic dyes since the 1870s. Consider that before the late 19th century a common way to get a vibrant red was to use cochineal, a dye made from beetles from Mexico and South America. The dye, also known as carmine, was made by pounding or boiling the insects, something that cooks did for upper class households. Synthetic dyes were generally cheaper, easier to use, standardized, and more durable than what producers had used previously. Hisano explains that the addition of Brilliant Blue FCF, for example, was a means for canned foods manufacturers to make their canned peas appear "natural and fresh" [43]. Similarly, meatpackers used sweeteners and dyes to obtain a "natural" (read: bright red) color for their products. The resulting surge of foods including synthetic dyes spurred regulation, notably the 1906 Food and Drug Act, which gave the federal government oversight of the coloring of food products as well as the subsequent establishment of the Color Laboratory of the Bureau of Chemistry (the forerunner of the Food and Drug Administration) in 1916.

The fourth chapter of the book, From Natural Dyes to Cake Mixes, shows how gender and notions of ideal femininity, domesticity, and "daintiness" were connected to foods and their colors. White and light pink in particular came to signify "daintiness" and a sought-after femininity very much connected to notions of class and race. In the 19th century, wealthy white women in urban areas had signaled proper femininity through the creation of visually appealing dishes (even when they did not make them themselves). Artificial dyes, cake mixes, and gelatin products enabled middle-class white women to perform daintiness as well. Hisano reveals that cake mixes often required

adding an egg as well as water to the mix, and had women color the icing before putting it on the finished cake as a conscious move on the part of the companies selling the mixes: this left room for women to make a cake theirs and feel that they were successfully exercising their creativity, femininity, and fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers.

The strategies and technologies behind the coloring of fresh produce are the focus of chapter five, Making Oranges Orange. A prime example is Florida oranges. Just as butter is not always "naturally" a deep yellow, fresh and ripe oranges are not necessarily a bright orange. Some oranges, for reasons related to variety or climate, are greenish when ripe and will be overripe if you wait for them to turn bright orange. The Florida citrus industry, concerned with competition from California growers, who enjoyed a more stable climate and more consistently orange oranges, turned to various methods to obtain an orange color. Stoves and kerosene lamps, and then ethylene gas, helped to ripen oranges, but oranges were also often dyed a bright orange. Florida Citrus growers strongly believed that consumers would prefer their oranges less if they were less orange. In fact, there was a strong relationship between the color of oranges and the price and for many fruits and vegetables color was an important criterion for determining the quality grade it received. Interestingly, however, sales were hurt when the federal government insisted that dyed oranges be stamped with the words "Color Added." Hisano thus demonstrates that there is nothing simple about color, even for produce. Color is produced as the result of biological and climactic conditions, but also technological, economic, cultural and political influences as well.

In Chapter Six, Fake Food, Hisano shows how state and national government actors became caught up in notions of what colors were "natural" or "right" for certain foods through an analysis of color use and regulation in the American butter and margarine industry from the late 19th century onward. Butter was associated with a golden yellow color, a color that butter from certain types of cows could take on in summer months when they fed on ample

grasses. Because this yellow was seen as characteristic of butter and yellow butter was deemed more valuable, producers often dyed their butter yellow in order to try to make it more appealing to consumers. Consumers, accustomed to this yellow butter, also came to see the color as "natural" and "normal." When margarine entered the US market in the 1870s, its producers sought to make it yellow as well, but butter producers strenuously opposed this. This led to what were known as "anti-color" laws aimed at margarine. From today's perspective, some of these developments seem totally absurd, like state laws that required the dyeing of margarine pink in order to contrast it (negatively) with butter or practices like the bleaching of margarine in order to avoid taxes imposed on colored margarine (whether the margarine was intentionally dyed or not). Interestingly, consumers often dyed their margarine, affirming that color was indeed something that mattered to them.

Hisano turns her attention to the modern supermarket in Chapter Seven, The Visuality of Freshness, explaining how bright lights, mirrors, transparent plastic wrap, and refrigeration technology were all deployed toward the visual display of freshness. In spite of the rhetoric of visibility and transparency, however, Hisano observes that supermarkets became standardized, clean, sterile, and cold. In a modern supermarket, customers served themselves to prepackaged meat from shelves. What was lost was the relationships that had existed between customers and staff, who had previously served customers, in the process also giving them information and advice about the ingredients they were choosing. Hisano recognizes the important point that while customers were able to see what they were buying more clearly, the labor in the supply chain became less visible.

A history of the evolution of color in the modern food industry in the US would be incomplete without an account of consumer movements and countercultural reactions to the use of synthetic dyes. This is the focus of the book's eight chapter, Reimagining the Natural. Prominent in this chapter is the prolonged controversy surrounding Red No. 2, a dye that was among the first

certified for coloring food and that became widely used. As consumer groups mobilized against the continued certification of the dye when studies revealed that it might be carcinogenic, industry groups profiting from its use argued that it was safe for specific uses and in limited doses. In this chapter, Hisano deftly depicts the trajectory of the use of artificial colorants in food in the US.

The book's final chapter, Eye Appeal Is Buy Appeal, serves as a conclusion, tying together the findings of earlier chapters. Hisano reiterates the book's message that "[t]he color of food is not merely a physiological characteristic but a contested terrain where nature and technology intersect; business interests, government regulation, and consumer expectations compete; and taste and sight are intertwined" [216]. She also reminds us that standardization and a concomitant uniformity occurred during the time period from the 1870s to 1970s and that this process was contested. Her conclusion also serves to link the book's key observations to more recent trends.

Visualizing Taste provides a nuanced analysis of late 19th and early 20th century food industry moves to capitalize on the power of color and social and government reactions. Hisano's research is solid, full of well-documented examples that are presented in detail, and her writing is clear and a pleasure to read. One of the things I most appreciated about the book's explanation of the US food industry's use of color to appeal to consumers in the late 19th and early 20th century is the attention Hisano pays to the reasons producers and corporations did what they did. In the case of oranges, Florida growers were reacting to the economic threat of competition from California oranges and dealing with environmental conditions that were less favorable to producing oranges with the color they believed that consumers were more likely to buy. Hisano doesn't let businesses off the hook, however, and includes examples of foods that were colored with harmful additives, including "penny candy" popular with children that was often dyed with poisonous substances like red lead, copper, and vermillion. In Hisano's account, consumer groups, concerned citizens, government actors, and industry stakeholders worked to redress

harmful food industry practices.

While some writers are apt to overstate the importance of their findings, if anything, I found the significance of this research and its contemporary relevance understated. While *Visualizing Taste* examines the United States from the 1870s to the 1970s, the themes the book takes up and the analysis that Hisano offers are timely and its insights relevant far outside of North America. Here in Japan, egg yolks—with saturated orangish-yellow yolks seen as very desirable, for instance—strike me as a contemporary parallel. With the color of yolks functioning as an index of quality, freshness, and deliciousness, producers choose the feed for their hens accordingly and actively market eggs based on the color of their yolks. The colors may be celebrated as close to the natural ideal, but like the examples in Hisano's book they are produced by industry in response to perceived consumer preferences and as a reaction to various government policies.

Cochineal might seem like a quaint example given that it is mentioned as a common coloring agent in the 19th century, but the dye is in fact still in use today and was even notably used by Starbucks to color red blended drinks until vegetarian consumer groups successfully campaigned for its exclusion. While the color of these sweet drinks did not come from an artificial coloring, the color nevertheless did not seem "right" or "natural" to everyone. As Hisano makes clear in *Visualizing Taste*, there is very little that is natural about the color of food, even if we tend to take it for granted. Color is a product of technology, business decisions, regulation, and consumer preferences—culture and history, if you will.

Hisano's volume will find a place on my bookshelf among books about the transformation of the American food industry in the 20th century, like Warren Belasco's *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* and Amy Bentley's *Inventing Baby Food: Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet*, and scholarship on food and the senses, including *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, edited by

Carolyn Korsmeyer, and *Making Taste Public: Ethnographies of Food and the Senses*, edited by Carole Counihan and Susanne Højlund.

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