

## Food Inc. Snack, Crack and Pop

**Ross** [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. And welcome to diet season. The idea at the heart of every diet is that if you're fat, it's solely your fault. But what if that simply isn't true? Yes, sedentary lives have expanded our waistlines, but so too have the multi billions of dollars that the food industry pump into feeding us lies year after year.

**Video** [00:00:55] Various fast food advertisement clips

**Ross** [00:01:20] The vicious circle is pernicious. Food scientists engineer crave-able products that have 'bliss points'. Consumers lose control of their eating habits and then their will power. Self-blame kicks in and then self-esteem plummets, which means to temporarily escape those understandable negative feelings, consumers find themselves back at the food store. Michael, it seems to me that when we talk about food, we often talk about the food industry, the food business, and in a sense, that's almost where we've lost the battle, because as soon as you start talking about business like agri business, we're talking implicitly about profits. When you think about that business sale, you can't have a massive profit on very good ingredients. So something has to give. Is that really the dichotomy between eating well and a lot of the junk food that's pumped into the world?

**Michael Moss** [00:02:22] Yeah, I think you're right. I mean, I think that sort of after World War Two, most of us still ate whole foods, grains and vegetables and meats. And then we gradually allowed this industry to tell us what to eat and to form and control our eating habits. I mean, it's even worse than that. We returned food over to them, allowing them to define it in a way that ultimately was not very good for us. I mean, I like to think that the food industry is not this evil giant that sort of intentionally set out to make us usually overweight or overdependent on their products. I mean, by and large, they were responding to these big societal changes that were happening. And after World War Two, one of the things you found is that more and more women were getting jobs outside of the house. And that caused us to be time hungry. We wanted products that would save us time and allow us not to have to rush home and spend hours in the kitchen during dinner.

**Ross** [00:03:21] So as an industry, they exploited our desire for convenience?

**Michael Moss** [00:03:25] Yeah, the food companies are incredibly good at sort of tapping into those biological instincts we have for cheapness. We love our food as inexpensive as we can possibly get it. We love our food to be convenient and easy as a time saver. And then, of course, we love the flavours that they're able to emit. And they're really brilliant at tapping into and exploiting those biological loves that we have. And I was lucky to meet one of the icons in the industry whose name was Howard Moskowitz. He was trained in high math and then experimental psychology at Harvard University. He's responsible for many of the biggest brand products in the grocery store. And he walked me through his recent creation of a new flavour of soda for the American company. Dr. Pepper.

**Ross** [00:04:14] Right.

**Michael Moss** [00:04:15] He started with no less than 60 versions of sweetness, submitted those two, three or four thousand consumer taste testing is around the country and then took the data and put it in a computer and he did his high math regression analysis thing and out comes these bell shaped curves where at the top of the curve is the perfect amount of sweetness that would send most people over the moon and their products flying off the shelf. It was Howard who coined the term 'the bliss point' to describe our innate biological attraction to sugar. But here's where it gets really interesting, which is when you talk to nutritionists, the problem isn't that the companies have consultants like Howard working for them, engineering bliss points for things that we know should be sweet. They marched around the grocery store, adding sugar to things that didn't used to be sweet anymore, creating a bliss point. So now that some yogurt can have as much sugar in it per serving as ice cream, bread has added sugar in it to create this bliss point for sugar, pasta sauce can have the equivalent of a couple of Oreo cookies with a sugar and a tiny hubcap serving. And what this did was create in us this expectancy that everything should be sweet.

**Ross** [00:05:35] Right.

**Michael Moss** [00:05:35] And so when you drag yourself over to the vegetable aisle and try to eat those things that have other tastes like bitter or sour, you know, you're going to have a rebellion on your hands if you have kids.

**Ross** [00:05:47] The interesting thing about Howard, when asked, he said that he doesn't drink soda because, quote, "it's bad for your teeth."

**Michael Moss** [00:05:54] Yeah, exactly.

**Ross** [00:05:56] That's quite an out, isn't it? And that's quite dark.

**Michael Moss** [00:05:58] That's one of the year's surprising things for me. Well, two surprising things from my research report is, one, the executives of these companies don't eat their own products.

**Ross** [00:06:07] They don't try their own supply.

**Michael Moss** [00:06:09] They know better in terms of how powerful their supply is. And then, two, those companies are even more hooked on using, in this case, gobs of salt, sugar, fat than we are independent on those.

**Ross** [00:06:24] Why?

**Michael Moss** [00:06:24] Because it's money to them. It's profitability. I mean, there's this formula in the industry called the least cost formulation. Again, knowing that we like our food as inexpensive as we can possibly get it. They're constantly redesigning their products to make the cost less so they can lower the price. Sugar, salt, fat or by and large, quite inexpensive as additives to food. And that's one of the reasons they're so dependent on those.

**Ross** [00:06:52] But now we're back to the business end, right? Because ultimately you're looking for margin, you're looking to pad products out, you want economies of scale. At what cost?

**Michael Moss** [00:06:59] That's the cost of the convenience, the low price, the cost has been to our health. I mean, the numbers are staggering.

**Ross** [00:07:07] And what are the numbers?

**Michael Moss** [00:07:07] Well, in this country, 40 percent now of American adults are obese, defined as not just overweight, thirty five pounds of overweight or more. Another third of the country is overweight approaching obesity. That's just that's a sort of one crude measure of us losing control of our food. There's diabetes. There's gout. There are all sorts of other sort of health issues, along with just kind of discomfort and agony of having lost touch with something that we used to love, cooking food with family. It was warmth. It's our history. It's our culture. It's warmth that we've sold off to the companies and exchange for what we thought was a better deal - convenience and cheapness.

**Ross** [00:07:56] Was the television part of this? was it actually the TV dinner that started the TV meal, ironically?.

**Michael Moss** [00:08:02] Yeah. As a kid, we grew up on TV. We had little trays and with our TV dinners that we got it from the frozen section and watched TV together. That contributed to what's called kind of a mindlessness of eating where we allowed ourselves to be distracted by other things to the extent that we lost touch with the food. And the other phenomena that happened to us, is we started snacking. And in this country, it happened seemingly almost overnight where parents stopped telling their kids not to spoil their appetite for meals. It became socially acceptable to eat anything, anywhere, any time. Snacks became the fourth meal. We're now getting on average, 580 calories a day from snacking on average, three times a day. And so that sped up kind of the process of eating and diminished the importance of the family meal even further.

**Video clip** [00:08:59] My name is Tam Fry. I am the chair of the UK National Obesity Forum. Hidden sugar is a real problem. The packaging of food products is so bad in this country that manufacturers can put in sugar to great volume without the customer actually being aware that the sugar is there. Another form of hidden sugar is that sugar is put in things that you least expect to find sugar. I'm particularly concerned about the way in which the sugar industry has behaved in relation to how much it puts in its products. That is, in my view, unforgivable and corporately irresponsible. I am very concerned about the way in which the sugar industry has influenced research, which influences people in the choices that they make. It is now well-documented that sugar companies get together and provide researchers with the money which they want in order to do their work. And unfortunately, he who pays the piper calls the tune. And so researchers know very much that they need to modify or even just ignore some of their research findings because it doesn't suit the industry that is paying their work. They use all kinds of descriptions of sugar. Particularly disastrous is any word which has got the words OSE at the end - glucose, lactose, fructose, the plethora of them. And they use those words correctly, but in a form which disguises the fact that their products are laden with this food. And of course, the consumer is then not aware of it. When

you look at a product and you look at the traffic light labels, you do not know unless you have been told to look for it, that the percentages and the levels are all based on an adult females daily requirement. And with children, that is usually probably two or three times as much as that particular child should be having. And that is the disaster, particularly, shall we say, with breakfast cereals, where breakfast cereals are laden with sugar, and the children love it. Particularly, of course, then that affects the poorer families, poorer families who with less disposable income have a higher percentage of sugar in their children's diets than anyone would wish. One of the things which really concerns me, and should concern the country, is the way in which the sugar industry has put its material in baby foods. Baby foods are now so sugary. The reason that they do that, is because they want to hook the children on the sugar, make it addictive so that sugar remains with them for the rest of their lives, thereby, they will have a absolutely assured market.

**Ross** [00:12:05] All that backdrop, all that historical context, the food executives must know, like our friend Howard with his Dr. Pepper, they must know that that's what's going on in society. And most meetings, if not all, when you're selling product, must be geared towards how do we exploit that socio economic environment.

**Michael Moss** [00:12:24] I spent time with the former president of Coca-Cola, the soda giant, and he sort of explained to me that when you're in the mindset of this industry that's fiercely competitive with one another, all of your energy at work and at home when you're thinking about work, is focused on beating the competition. And so you just kind of cut out all those kind of nagging questions in the back of your head about whether what you're doing is good for you, for anybody, and you're totally focused on winning the game.

**Ross** [00:12:54] Right.

**Michael Moss** [00:12:54] That's how they get through the day.

**Ross** [00:12:55] And in a sense, that's how people can win or lose wars?

**Michael Moss** [00:12:59] Well, exactly. That sort of blind rush toward where winning is everything. It's the same way.

**Ross** [00:13:05] And the point on that is a lot of when you do research around war, people don't want to kill other human beings. So you have to move the language. So you have to call other human beings, targets. You know, you have to desensitize an army to what they're doing. Have the work force within these food giants been desensitised to the social effects of what they're pushing into the world?

**Michael Moss** [00:13:28] Well, absolutely. And you can see it in the language. I mean, look, I'm an investigative journalist. I follow the money. But I really fell in love with the language that they use when they're describing their efforts to maximize the allure of their products, which is what their job is all about. I mean, they hate the word addiction, right? So instead, they use things like 'snack ability' and 'crave ability'. And one of my favourite words that they use is moreish-ness.

**Ross** [00:13:54] Moreish-ness?

**Michael Moss** [00:13:54] Yeah, because everything about them, all of their work is aimed at getting us to not just like their products, but to want more and more of them. So, moreish-ness fits right into their mode.

**Ross** [00:14:10] Drug dealers. Cocaine is moreish. Heroin is moreish. I mean, it's the same setup is it not? Or is that too dramatic?

**Michael Moss** [00:14:18] No, I mean, look, there is some credibility to give to sort of people who argue that, look, there are some foods out there for some people that are every bit as compelling and causing them to act compulsively as certainly tobacco and alcohol and maybe even sort of some drugs. They're that powerful for some people - it's that hard for them to resist.

**Ross** [00:14:38] When we talk about this, you can't help but think that those levels of addiction, ultimately, are born out of an isolation. So if we don't have the nuclear family anymore, the two point four kids, the cooking and the exchange of ideas that we talked about, that you do have screens, many screens, whether it be television or scrolling, and then you're still snacking and eating. There is a huge isolation to that, is there not?

**Michael Moss** [00:15:01] Oh, yeah, absolutely. For the book I'm working on now. I met a teenager who had sued McDonald's for making her fat. This was some years ago and the lawsuit didn't go anywhere. But it was so interesting and compelling sort of talking to her and listening to her. Just at that point, I mean, her view of people, so many people eat at McDonald's is that they're sad. They're home watching TV. They see the advertisement. They feel the joy of that advertisement. And they go by themselves to McDonald's or other fast food restaurant and they eat trying to fill that empty hole in themselves. I thought that was so insightful on her part. The food is isolating. I mean, they took yogurt, for example, put it in a plastic tube. But you didn't need a spoon to eat. You would just take that tube and cut it open and squeeze it into your mouth while you're on the joystick playing a computer game, probably with a computer and not even another person on the other end. So by design, their products are made to work for us in isolation.

**Ross** [00:16:08] And ultimately work for them in stock markets?

**Michael Moss** [00:16:11] There you go.

**Ross** [00:16:24] In that first half, what we talk about is a huge industry, which is incredibly pernicious, is after one thing which is shareholder value and executive pay and it's preying on people who are isolated, maybe not as educated they could be about these things, and also poor. When you think about that, really waging a war in many ways against people who can't help themselves eat these products.

**Michael Moss** [00:16:44] It is a war. And it's a war that they're waging really skilfully and so many people have lost control of their eating. We have this disordered eating now in the world as a result of that. I met people who can't touch a grain of sugar without losing control of their eating, and they go overboard and just can't stop feeding themselves sugar or might be white refined flour. People have different triggers for different things. But the bottom line

is that so many of us are so vulnerable to their advertising and their formulas and the marketing of their products and the attractiveness of those products.

**Ross** [00:17:18] And at that point, what do they do? Because ultimately, it seems to me that the whole system is geared towards pushing more products towards those people. Now, that happens also, by the way, in the gambling industry. It happens across the board, actually, because of marketeers and their clients - the big companies -exploit that vulnerability.

**Michael Moss** [00:17:38] I think the first thing that people do is they look for a silver bullet, they look for one thing that can save them because it's like kind of the easiest way to go, right? So typically what we've had is people who will turn to a diet. If weight is their problem, they will find some solution like that to help them lose weight. And the problem is that all diets work until they stop working. And almost all diets stop working because they're really difficult to stick to.

**Ross** [00:18:06] Right. So people have bounced from one industry into the diet industry?

**Michael Moss** [00:18:12] The diet industry is huge.

**Ross** [00:18:12] And then they fail in the diet industry because it's super difficult to change habits. Then they hit the self blame button and they're back into the food industry because that gives them comfort. And they say, actually, this is me. And then they carry on. And then they're into the health industry. I mean, it's a terrible, vicious cycle.

**Michael Moss** [00:18:32] It's a vicious cycle not kind of realizing that you're not the problem, the companies are the problem. And sort of keeping your focus on that, on the companies, on the tricks that they use to keep us dependent, I think it's a really helpful way of looking at it going forward and really empowering.

**Ross** [00:18:47] Because suddenly you're taking back control and actually you're not saying it's me, you're saying it's you and you need to get out my life.

**Michael Moss** [00:18:54] I can walk into the grocery store now and just kind of laugh at all of the things that the food industry does to get us to reach for that product and put it in the grocery cart.

**Ross** [00:19:06] Tell us then, so when you walk in, what do you see?

**Michael Moss** [00:19:09] It's all about real estate, right? First you get the soft music playing sort of like loosen you up a little, right? They also want you to lose the sense of yourself. So they don't want you to connect the decisions you're about to make with the rest of the world out there. So you're kind of in this la la land atmosphere. They've incredibly bright colours, which science shows we're attracted to. They control the positioning of their products so that the thing is called the end caps, which is the end of the aisle facing the aisle where most people walk down, actually, you have to buy that space to put your products on there will see that and get attracted to those products. They know, for example, from doing tests, that when you walk into an aisle, they put devices on people's heads that follow their eye movements as they shop. And they know that our attention will go to the centre of the aisle at eye level. And



so that's where they will put the biggest selling products, the most attractive products, in the cereal aisle. If you want something without sugar, it's going to be down at the ground.

**Ross** [00:20:16] Because the eye level is buy level. And this is the rhetoric, right?

**Michael Moss** [00:20:20] Or up high where your kids can't reach out.

**Ross** [00:20:20] But they say these things, these people.

**Michael Moss** [00:20:25] And then on the packages, right, they control the front of the package almost entirely, which is where they're putting their best foot forward again. And breakfast cereals. It's going to be a cartoon character to catch the attention of your kid, or if you're interested in, like nutrition, they're going to put in big letters, 'added calcium', something nice to say about their products that will distract you from the fine print on the package.

**Ross** [00:20:51] There's a wonderful anecdote in London where a bunch of MBAs, business school types, were taken by the food industry execs into the supermarket and said, 'bring back the most brilliant bit of packaging that you can and we'll judge you on it', because packaging is huge. And the one particularly arty type in the whole group of 16 just brought back a single egg. And this executive, because it's beautifully packaged, and this executive was suitably offended this because everyone else had brought all this glitzy stuff.

**Michael Moss** [00:21:20] I would have brought back something else.

**Ross** [00:21:21] What?

**Michael Moss** [00:21:21] I would have brought back a package that has five or six servings of cookies in it because it's so ingenious on their part, knowing that. So let's say we are worried about the calories or the other sort of bad additives and their return to the fine print on the back, it'll give us the numbers, but it's per serving if you pay attention to that. And they do that knowing that most people will not just eat one serving of the package, they'll half of it or even the whole package. So designing their package is again not to get us to not just like the product, but to want to eat more and more of it is what defines the processed food industry in my mind.

**Ross** [00:22:06] One of the defences that they use that I see regularly is this idea in the UK of the nanny state. So we don't want the state telling us what we can and can't do because you, the consumer, can make your own choices regardless of your addictions and your isolation, use it it because ultimately they can sell more product. Do they use that across the world as an excuse?

**Michael Moss** [00:22:24] Yeah, one of the push backs that they're getting are people designing taxes on soda and implementing taxes on. So if you buy soda you pay a little bit of a tax as a way of discouraging you from drinking that soda.

**Ross** [00:22:36] A sugar tax?

**Michael Moss** [00:22:36] Exactly. And that was that's exactly how the industry sort of fought back calling that a nanny tax, accusing the government of stepping in and blaming you, or rather blaming them, for their problem. And I think that's attractive. And I mean, nobody wants in this day and age, the government telling you what to do. So I think that works for the industry.

**Ross** [00:22:59] Just for context, the light that just went off that was a kitten.

**Michael Moss** [00:23:04] Yeah, I saw it out of my eye.

**Ross** [00:23:06] So what can people do? Because what we've fleshed out is a really pernicious industry that's got billions of dollars of marketing spend behind it. Ultimately, as you said, they're business people. And actually, if there is a social cost, then I don't do morality. How can people start to insulate themselves and defend against such a massive machine?

**Michael Moss** [00:23:25] So on a big level, it's already starting to happen. People are caring more about what they put in their bodies, paying attention with their eating, and they've stopped buying, to some extent, some of the junkiest products in the grocery store. And just that little bit of dip in sales is convincing the companies that they're going to have to start doing better by consumers. So there's an immediate sort of reaction to that going on already. And to some extent that'll work or it won't work depending on whether we can sort of maintain our interest and focus on eating better. I mean, if you're an individual, you're up against kind of a lifetime of bad habits. That's incredibly hard to break in a matter of days, weeks or even months, right? I like the idea of changing just one thing, for starters. And one of the food executives I interviewed who ran into trouble eating some of his own products when he couldn't run anymore for exercise. That's what he decided to do. He decided to stop drinking anything that had calories in it. I thought if I could just stop all the liquid calories, you know, that's one thing I can feel good about. It will go far toward reducing my overall calorie intake. So I think that picking just one thing and changing that and trying to stick with that for a while is maybe a really good strategy.

**Ross** [00:24:43] That's a start do you think because a lot of people go cold turkey and say, you know what, I'm going to quit all this, I'm going to go clean eating. That was a big fad, clean eating fat.

**Michael Moss** [00:24:51] And that's the extreme diet.

**Ross** [00:24:52] So it's one to the other?

**Michael Moss** [00:24:54] It'll work until it doesn't work. It's really hard to sustain that. But to change one thing is easier and more sustainable, especially when we get distracted by life, which we will inevitably.

**Ross** [00:25:05] It seems to me, though, that's a physical action and something that's concrete that you can do. But is that not the second step? Because is the first step removing self blame from this? Because actually what you're saying is I'm being preyed upon - whether it's



through the television, the Internet or my device on a daily basis. And I'm giving into that predation.

**Michael Moss** [00:25:23] Yeah, I totally love that. And again, that the sort of research I've done in this area for me has been really empowering because it gave me insight into everything they do to get us off our game and sort of knowing that. You don't have to blame them. But just kind of knowing that they have the power and they have the control, and that when I lose control, it's not my fault, it's their doing. I think that in and of itself levels the playing field tremendously for us.

**Ross** [00:25:51] So first thing, take self blame out because actually there's a war out there.

**Michael Moss** [00:25:55] I love that.

**Ross** [00:25:56] Second thing. Take one thing out, incremental change.

**Michael Moss** [00:25:59] Keep it easy on yourself.

**Ross** [00:26:00] Third thing?

**Michael Moss** [00:26:01] Start cooking - that thing we lost, right? - the thing we turned over to the food companies back after World War Two. And it's got to be easier than you think. I started doing that. I started to make my own spaghetti sauce. And it's so incredibly easy. It's cheaper too by the way.

**Ross** [00:26:18] And doesn't have nine cups of sugar in it?

**Michael Moss** [00:26:20] And that as well. I mean, the next thing is kids, of course, too. I mean, if you can work on the next generation to keep them from developing the bad habits that older people already have, then that's how you really change the future.

**Ross** [00:26:35] Seems to me that that's the most important bit. Because - and I have kids -.you know, when you see some of the advertising out there to shield them from that is vital.because it's so pernicious. We adults can make our own decision. These little ones can't. What sort of weight do you put on really looking after those young tender minds and keeping them away from all that as much as possible?

**Michael Moss** [00:26:58] Keeping away from it, but also offering them an alternative.

**Ross** [00:27:01] Right.

**Michael Moss** [00:27:01] In this country, in the rest of the world too, you're starting to see school gardens come back, not to make food to feed the kids during lunchtime, but to show them what a garden looks like and to get them excited about a radish so they can go home to their parents and say, 'you'll never believe what I just saw at school this thing called a radish'. Can we buy that the next time we go shopping, right? Sort of teaching them the value of real food I think in and of itself can be strong enough to kind of push back against the advertising that will continue to bombard them for the junk stuff.

**Ross** [00:27:37] Michael Moss, thank you very much for your time.

**Michael Moss** [00:27:39] Oh, my pleasure. Thank you.