

Junk Food Heaven

Bill Bryson

I decided to clean out the fridge the other day. We don't usually clean out our fridge — we just box it up every four or five years and send it off to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta with a note to help themselves to anything that looks scientifically promising - but we hadn't seen one of the cats for a few days and I had a vague recollection of having glimpsed something furry on the bottom shelf towards the back. (Turned out to be a large piece of Gorgonzola.)

So there I was, down on my knees unwrapping pieces of foil and peering cautiously into Tupperware containers, when I came across an interesting product called a breakfast pizza and I examined it with a kind of rueful fondness, as you might regard an old photograph of yourself dressed in clothes that you cannot believe you ever thought were stylish. The breakfast pizza, you see, represented the last surviving relic of a bout of very serious retail foolishness on my part.

Some weeks ago I announced to my wife that I was going to the supermarket with her next time she went because the stuff she kept bringing home was - how can I put this? - not fully in the spirit of American eating. Here we were living in a paradise of junk food - the country that gave the world cheese in a spray can - and she kept bringing home healthy stuff like fresh broccoli and packets of Ryvita.

It was because she was English, of course. She didn't really understand the rich, unrivalled possibilities for greasiness and goo that the American diet offers. I longed for artificial bacon bits, melted cheese in a shade of yellow unknown to nature, and creamy chocolate fillings, sometimes all in the same product. I wanted food that squirts when you bite into it or plops onto your shirt front in such gross quantities that you have to rise carefully from the table and limbo over to the sink to clean yourself up. So I accompanied her to the supermarket and while she was off squeezing melons and pricing shiitake mushrooms, I made for the junk food section —which was essentially all the rest of the store. Well, it was heaven.

The breakfast cereals alone could have occupied me for most of the afternoon. There must have been 200 types, and I am not exaggerating. Every possible substance that could be dried, puffed and coated with sugar was there. The most immediately arresting was a cereal called Cookie Crisp, which tried to pretend it was a nutritious breakfast but was really just chocolate chip cookies that you put in a bowl and ate with milk. Brilliant.

Also of note were cereals called Peanut Butter Crunch, Cinnamon Mini Buns, Count Chocula ('with Monster Marshmallows'), and a particularly hardcore offering called Cookie Blast Oat Meal, which contained *four* kinds of cookies. I grabbed one of each of the cereals and two of the oatmeal - often I've said that you shouldn't start a day without a big steaming bowl of cookies - and sprinted with them back to the trolley.

'What's that?' my wife asked in the special tone of voice with which she often addresses me in retail establishments.

I didn't have time to explain. 'Breakfast for the next six months,' I panted as I dashed past, 'and don't even *think* about putting any of it back and getting muesli.'

I had no idea how the market for junk food had proliferated. Everywhere I turned I was confronted with foods guaranteed to make you waddle, most of which were entirely new to me — jelly creme pies, moon pies, pecan spinwheels, peach mellos, root beer buttons, chocolate fudge devil dogs and a whipped marshmallow sandwich spread called Fluff, which came in a tub large enough to bath a baby in.

You really cannot believe the bounteous variety of non-nutritious foods available to the American supermarket shopper these days or the quantities in which they are consumed. I recently read that the average American eats 17.8 *pounds* of pretzels every year.

Aisle seven ('Food for the Seriously Obese') was especially productive. It had a whole section devoted exclusively to a product called Toaster Pastries, which included, among much else, eight different types of toaster strudel. And what exactly is toaster strudel? Who cares? It was coated in

sugar and looked drippy. I grabbed an armload.

I admit I got a little carried away — but there was so much and I had been away so long.

It was the breakfast pizza that finally made my wife snap. She looked at the box and said, ‘No.’
‘I beg your pardon, my sweet?’

‘You are not bringing home something called breakfast pizza. I will let you have’ — she reached into the trolley for some specimen samples — ‘root beer buttons and toaster strudel and...’ She lifted out a packet she hadn’t noticed before. ‘What’s this?’

I looked over her shoulder. ‘Microwave pancakes,’ I said.

‘Microwave pancakes,’ she repeated, but with less enthusiasm.

‘Isn’t science wonderful?’

‘You’re going to eat it all,’ she said. ‘Every bit of everything that you don’t put back on the shelves now. You do understand that?’

‘Of course,’ I said in my sincerest voice.

And do you know she actually made me eat it. I spent weeks working my way through a symphony of American junk food, and it was all awful. Every bit of it. I don’t know whether American junk food has got worse or whether my taste buds have matured, but even the treats I’d grown up with now seemed discouragingly pallid or disgustingly sickly.

The most awful of all was the breakfast pizza. I tried it three or four times, baked it in the oven, zapped it with microwaves, and once in desperation served it with a side of marshmallow Fluff, but it never rose beyond a kind of limp, chewy listlessness. Eventually I gave up altogether and hid the box in the Tupperware graveyard on the bottom shelf of the fridge.

Which is why, when I came across it again the other day, I regarded it with mixed feelings. I started to chuck it out, then hesitated and opened the lid. It didn’t smell bad — I expect it was pumped so full of chemicals that there wasn’t any room for bacteria —and I thought about keeping it a while longer as a reminder of my folly, but in the end I discarded it. And then, feeling peckish, I went off to the larder to see if I couldn’t find a nice plain piece of Ryvita and maybe a stick of celery.