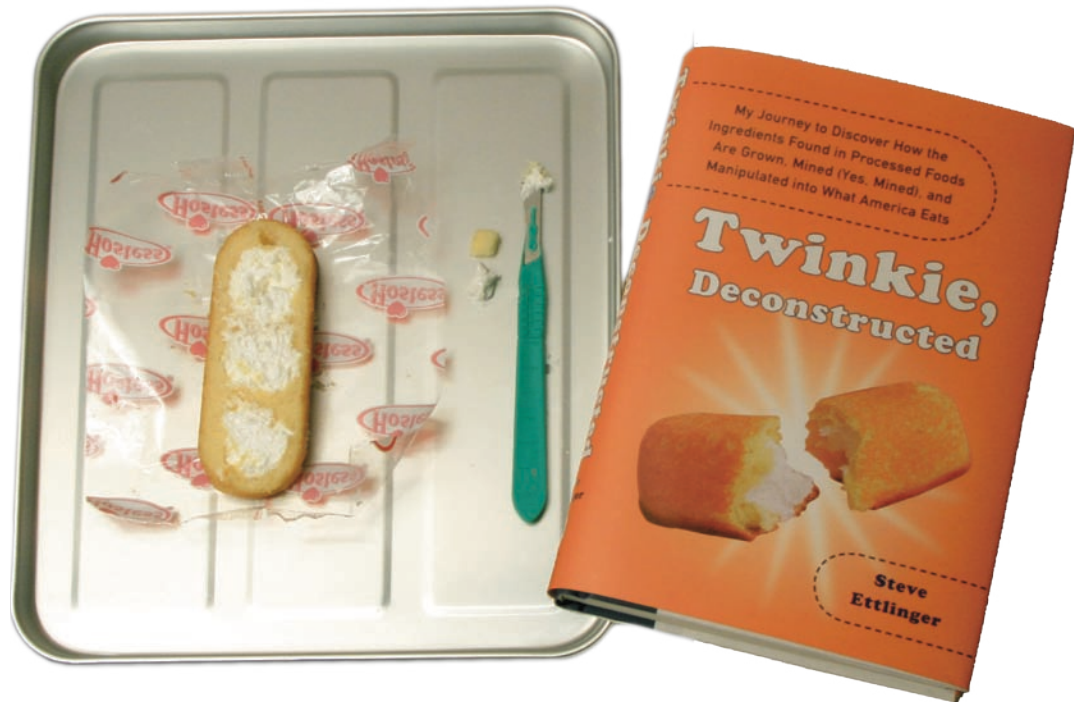


Inside the Twinkie

Tearing into the quintessential manufactured food in *Twinkie, Deconstructed*.

by Hsiao-Yun Chu



Even before reading Steve Ettlinger's book, I felt mildly offended on behalf of the Twinkie. I imagined millions of perfectly well-behaved Twinkies, waiting patiently in their cardboard trays, being attacked for their artificiality while other junk foods remained unscathed. Is this fair when the Twinkie was, after all, one of the first snacks to respond to our collective cultural desire for a soft, sweet little cake with a creamy center that is also cheap, convenient, long-lasting, and predictable? Ettlinger himself acknowledges this early on in his book, admitting that he chose the Twinkie as a case study for many thousands of processed snack foods. He then embarks on a long journey to trace the "massive industrial and technical activities involved... in the pursuit of [making] something that isn't even necessary to our existence." Ettlinger visits farms, factories, and processing plants to track the origins of every ingredient in the Twinkie, from the eggs to the sodium acid pyrophosphate. What results is a clever book, filled with readable science

tidbits, engaging dabs of history, food facts, and quick sketches of the people that he meets along the way.

Twinkie, Deconstructed delivers on its promise to discover how the ingredients found in processed foods are grown, mined, and manipulated to create a highly sophisticated industrial product that answers the national desire for a convenient snack cake. Ettlinger is thorough in his research and neutral in his delivery; he favors witty descriptions and bits of trivia over value judgments or analyses. By the end of the book, though, one wishes that he had been a little more critical, if only to add an original perspective to his work. Ettlinger takes us on dozens of factory tours and drops hundreds of facts, most of which will be forgotten as soon as they are read, all to prove a basic fact that we all knew before reading this book: the Twinkie is a highly processed foodstuff. He neatly sidesteps the issue of health by suggesting that the Twinkie, just like the automobile or the toaster, is but a child of the industrial revolution, a factory-made commodity

for a consumer society. Twinkies are thus an accepted part of the industrial landscape, just like Pringles, Oreos, Blow Pops, and Ding Dongs.

Unfortunately, this accommodating conclusion devalues the enormous amount of research that went into making this book. How could somebody who spent so many months investigating, traveling, and interviewing settle for such a scrawny little ending? It's too bad because the premise of the book is interesting, but it could be much richer if the author had been willing to take a few more risks. Reading Ettlinger's book is a bit like eating a bunch of Twinkies: the first mouthful is lovely and sweet, but the last few bites are a tasteless, spongy chore. In the end, the empty calories somehow fail to satisfy.

Twinkie, Deconstructed: My Journey to Discover How the Ingredients Found in Processed Foods are Grown, Mined (Yes, Mined) and Manipulated into What America Eats, by Steve Ettlinger. (March 2007). Hudson St.; 304 pages. ISBN 1594630186. List \$23.95.