



# Nothing if Not Colorful: Reading Culture in Food

by Chris Friend

**LANGUAGE SHAPES OUR SOCIETY AND THE WAYS WE THINK**, and the complexity of language requires our brains to have substantial processing power. The power needed to fuel our brains comes from calories in the foods we eat. Anthropologists like to say that large brains (like those found in modern humans) are “metabolically costly,” requiring more energy than any other organ given a brain’s size. Put simply, our heavy reliance on complex brain functions means we need to eat a lot of food. In addition to saying “you are what you eat,” we might adopt the phrase, “you think what you digest;” but that doesn’t roll off the tongue quite as easily. No matter how we phrase it, the ability to use language has a long-standing biological connection with the foods we eat.

## Food’s Role in Language Development

Because larger brains require markedly larger amounts of energy to sustain, humans have always needed to strategize to achieve the necessary rate of consumption, going all the way back to the use of fire to heat our food. Cooking food makes its calories easier to digest. Cooking also softens food, making it faster and less challenging to eat. Less time spent consuming food for calories means more time to do things with those calories. Cooking vegetables (especially root vegetables and tubers like potatoes, yams, and cassava) breaks down starches and other hard-to-digest components, making their energy and nutrition far easier to absorb. The ability to cook food, which first came through our control of fire, became a watershed moment in human history. Researchers have established a connection between our ability to control fire and the enlargement of our brains. In other words, fire made us smarter.

Where early humans gained a tremendous metabolic advantage by cooking food,

modern societies benefit from drastic improvements to food production. As the manufacturing process becomes more streamlined and efficient, we spend far less time and energy making each calorie of food. Perhaps the greatest contribution to efficient food production comes from the specialization of labor, a development explored in great detail by Peter Diamandis in *Abundance*, a 2015 book exploring the effects of production advances on the distribution of wealth. Today, most people neither produce nor package most of the foods we consume. Instead, specialized producers dedicate their time and energy toward developing, producing, packaging, and delivering far more food than they (or their families) could consume in a lifetime. The efficiencies and excesses created by labor specialization ultimately allow us to spend our time and money pursuing activities beyond merely feeding ourselves.

To demonstrate how specialization reduces labor and time, Andy George, creator of the “How to Make Everything” series on YouTube, made a chicken sandwich from

scratch - including planting and harvesting the wheat to make the bread as well as raising and slaughtering the chicken. What would typically involve five dollars and as many minutes at a drive-thru took George six months and \$1,500. By having people in our society dedicated to growing wheat, raising chickens, and assembling sandwiches, we devote a tiny fraction of our effort toward obtaining the calories we need to survive, prosper, and think.

All this abundance and efficiency brings us to a fascinating state of affairs, linguistically speaking. When food costs so little to produce and consume, we can afford to talk about our food in different, more detailed ways. Specialization in food production allows us to use specialized language to think and write about what we eat. Today, obtaining calories is easy... perhaps too easy, as evidenced by the obesity epidemic in America. Because we no longer need to worry about how many calories are in our food, we now have the luxury of paying more attention to what’s not in our food. Modern food labeling emphasizes what’s missing.

## The Rhetoric of Absence

The popularity of dieting, combined with food allergies and sensitivities, makes it sensible for food-production companies to market what is not in any given product. Food packaging catering to current diet fads can entice consumers to buy foods based on what’s missing from them. Foods labeled fat-free, low-calorie, low-sodium, or low-carb make it easy for dieters to see what meets their needs. Lactose-free, sugar-free, and gluten-free labels help consumers with dietary concerns like lactose intolerance, diabetes, or gluten intolerance quickly see which foods they can safely eat.

Highlighting what is not in a product uncovers one of the troubles with nutrition marketing: the practice is often deceptive, aiming to distract attention away from a bad characteristic by hiding it behind an allegedly good one. For instance, pickles have zero carbs and zero calories, a fact prominently displayed on the front of many brand-name jars. Fine print below the large carb/calorie claims encourage consumers to “see Nutrition Facts label for sodium content” – an amount sufficiently high that it can contribute to long-term health concerns. In *Salt, Sugar, Fat*, Michael Moss traces the origins of this deceptive practice to intentional marketing efforts of the processed-food industry. Moss suggests that when salt, sugar, or fat is reduced in a product, one or two of the other ingredients gets increased. For example, containers of yogurt often advertise their low fat content but ignore the high levels of sugar. Cheese packaging may highlight its low-carb nature, while information about saturated fat – which is arguably more important to know because of its adverse health effects – proves much harder to find, relegated to small print on the back of the package.

The labeling strategy of highlighting the absence of one harmful nutrient in the presence of a greater amount of another may be the most predictable, deceptive, and damaging to public health. Peanut butter marketed as “cholesterol-free” has unhealthy amounts of fat. Margarine also

has no cholesterol, but nearly half the fat in margarine is saturated or trans, the two worst kinds of fat to consume. Even the Cheerios attempts to direct attention in this way: its packaging points out the potential cholesterol-lowering benefits of whole-grain oats. Cheerios boxes say the cereal “can help” reduce (notably different from “does reduce”) the risk of heart disease, a claim supported by the American Heart Association. However, the only way whole-grain oats in Cheerios affect one’s risk of heart disease is when they are included in a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet, and it is, in fact, the reduction of fat and cholesterol that makes the most difference, not the whole grain. Similarly, Campbell’s



has touted “Healthy Request” soups that are lower in cholesterol and fat than their regular products while completely ignoring the extremely high sodium content and the link between a high-sodium diet and heart disease. The marketing rhetoric crafted by the processed-food industry intentionally distracts consumers from chronic, widespread health concerns. These deceptive practices survive the changing tides of fad diets, performing a slight of hand that hides the information we need to know behind the terms we want to see. Bacon may have zero carbs, but that still doesn’t make it healthy.

## The Rhetoric of Color

Not all food packaging aims to deceive consumers. Indeed, much of it exists to help simplify or expedite our decision-making process. In *The Art Of Choosing*, Sheena Iyengar explains that in the same way an overabundance of calories leads to obesity, an overabundance of choice leads to cognitive fatigue. When confronted with a simple choice, like the infamous “chicken or beef” selection for airplane service, decisions are easy to make. But with more complicated situations – such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, RC Cola, and store-brand generics, in addition to regular, diet, caffeine-free, and zero-calorie variations of each – our ability to navigate the selection decreases. We devote more of our brainpower to sorting and comparing our options and less of it toward evaluating which is the best or healthiest. In situations requiring quick decisions from among myriad choices, visual rhetoric – and especially the rhetoric of color – helps consumers find the brands they seek.

American grocery store shelves have earned a reputation for overwhelming shoppers with too much variety. In these contexts, consumers must decide among manufacturer, product line, and specific variety to find the food they desire. Kellogg, General Mills, and Post compete with each other for space on store shelves, and offering more products means more boxes that need to be visible. It also makes it possible to get overwhelmed by variety, unable to see either end of the array of boxes when in the middle of the aisle. Post’s Honey Bunches of Oats cereal comes in eight varieties; Kellogg makes sixteen types of Special K; General Mills offers eighteen forms of Cheerios. How can consumers navigate such congested waters? Reading that many boxes takes too much time. Other, simpler visuals must be used. Manufacturers use color to distinguish their products from competitors. The cereal examples above likely brought to mind specific shades of gold, red, and yellow, each corresponding to the (literally) trademarked coloring of the products’ boxes. The most vivid example, however, comes from the soda aisle. Fans of one major Atlanta-based soft-drink brand automatically look for a



Figure 1

particular shade of red when entering the aisle, making their selection easy to spot at a distance. Fans of that brand's largest competitor likewise scan for a specific shade of blue. Figure 1 presents a collection of color palettes from major American soft-drink brands. Several of the brands may be recognizable even without the attached labels. With this instant recognition, soda brands can be found on a shelf more quickly than their labels can be read, further reducing the likelihood that consumers will notice the sugar content in the nutritional information.

And speaking of sugar, powdered sweeteners come in paper packets printed to color code chemical compounds. In this way, consumers looking for their

preferred sweetener need not examine or read each packet's label; they can simply select their preference based on the color of the packet itself – a much faster and simpler process. Obvious visual differences help identify refined sucrose (aka sugar; white), unprocessed sugar cane extract (aka “raw” sugar; brown), aspartame (aka Equal; blue), saccharine (aka Sweet'n Low; pink), stevioside (aka Stevia; green), or sucralose (aka Splenda, yellow). The color-chemical correlation is so consistent that people can easily request a sweetener by color rather than name, and generic equivalents of the name-brand products benefit from instant recognition.

Beverage manufacturers use color in another curious, brand-agnostic way. Labels for diet varieties of popular soda brands feature silver as the prominent color (with the brand's distinctive color as a bold accent), and caffeine-free versions emphasize gold on their labels. As a result of this consistency, consumers concerned about their sugar or caffeine intake can predictably select their preferred soda variety regardless of branding – a convenient feature considering the health risks for those with diabetes or hypertension, for instance. Coffee packaging uses similar color consistency: decaffeinated coffee sold on store shelves prominently features green (as a marking or in the container itself) to differentiate the products.

A notable variation of the decaffeinated color-code is that the pots used to serve decaffeinated coffee in cafés and restaurants use orange as their distinguishing color. The orange of decaf coffee pots originated in blatant brand marketing, unlike the brand agnosticism of silver and gold used in soda packaging. Shortly after decaffeinated coffee became commercially available in the United States, the manufacturers of the Sanka brand (a name derived from the French *sans*

*caféine*, meaning “without caffeine”) began an aggressive marketing campaign that included efforts to associate decaffeinated coffee with the orange used on its product packaging. Part of that campaign involved providing orange-handled coffee pots to cafés serving their coffee. Considering we still use orange in restaurants nearly ninety years after the introduction of Sanka, that campaign should be seen as a wild success. The color orange has a permanent place in the international language of coffee.

## Cultural Rhetoric in Food

The words and colors used on food labels reflect more about our cultural expectations than about the foods themselves. When we read the label on a food container, we read much more than merely its contents. We read coded signifiers of dietary fads, public-health concerns, and brand affiliations. Reading beyond the words gives consumers insight into the motives and goals of manufacturers – to make us buy and consume far more calories than we need. Decades of marketing efforts have been embedded within labeling practices, and those efforts compete with government requirements addressing public-health concerns. Comparing the prominence, vibrancy, and size of health claims with the volume, fine print, and misdirection of measurable ingredient lists tells us more about the values and rhetorical skill of manufacturers than about the nutritional impact of their products. Our reactions to the colors used on product packages say more about our affinities and expectations than about the ingredients of the package itself. Despite the impression that what's around the food tells us what's inside, the exact opposite tends to be true: food packages tell us more about the world and society outside the package than the product inside. The rhetoric of food reflects culture, not contents. ■

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