

The Invention of Baby Food

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Amy Bentley's book *Inventing Baby Food: Taste, Health, and the Industrialization of the American Diet* contains a fascinating graph. It starts in 1880 and comes forward to 2000 and plots the generally accepted age at which babies in the US should start eating solid foods. In the 1880s it is up around 11 months. In the 1990s and 2000s it comes down to 5 months. But in the middle, the 1950s and 60s, the average dips down to just two months. Most babies don't even get their first tooth until they are around six months. So what's going on? Why the dip? Why so low? And why does it go up again?

Amy: It's related to a variety of factors, including the industrialisation of the food supply and the industrialisation of food for infants, the discovery of vitamins in the early 20th century, that for the first time fruits and vegetables had some food value beyond just nice to have and in fact, even a little suspicion. The rise of the medical professions, specialisation in nutrition and ob gyn and paediatrics, and everybody kind of wanting a piece of infant feeding practice and advice. Advertising.

And so all of that just created this momentum to invent the product, for instance, because a category like baby food did not exist. So the invention of a category of food for infants, and then also just ramping up in volume and diversity and in imprinting itself on American culture, that it becomes a rite of passage to feed your child these commercial baby foods. And the earlier the better.

Jeremy: But apart from formula milk, when did when did baby food, I mean, food for babies, when did that become a thing, a category?

Amy: You have household manuals in the 1870s, 1880s. And there were these categories of these soft foods, which were mostly gruels. So grain based gruels and beef broth, minced beef, scraped beef. And these were thought to be the strength producing foods. These were the foods that if you were, if your system was compromised, if you

were elderly, these were the foods that you needed. Infants were also supposed to eat these foods, but not too early at an age. After a year, approximately a year of age, the first 12 months being breastfed. And so fruits and vegetables were never to be a part of an infant's diet. In fact, the household manuals recommended they not be fed fruits and vegetables until after the second summer.

Jeremy: How did things move from these soft foods for invalids and the weak and infants? How did that become commercialised?

Amy: Well, in the early 20th century, canned food is just becoming ... proliferating and becoming safe and thought of as safe in the 1920s, teens. At some point — and there's there's myths surrounding it — it really begins in Rochester, New York, where a man is creating a soup concoction for his sick infant. And the infant becomes healthier, and his friends and neighbours ask for that recipe. And so he starts, he works with a cannery in Rochester, New York, to can those fruits and vegetables.

There's also the Gerber brothers in upstate Michigan who have a cannery and are producing fruits and vegetables canned. And there's an idea that babies can benefit from vegetables and fruits by then. And so there's lots of, you know, the women are making ... The cooking, the vegetables ... Are chopping them up or pureeing them, and it's creating an extra amount of work. And so the myth, the lore, is that Dorothy Gerber, Mrs Gerber, asked her husband, well, your canning fruits and vegetables anyway. Why don't you create some products for babies that are already pureed and available? And so they start manufacturing infant purees, and they slap a pencil sketch of a winsome baby on the front, the Gerber baby, and the product is just ... It's the right product at the right time. It captures, that baby captures the imagination. And so there's an advertising element that becomes popular, the product becomes available at the time when it is seen as needed for babies. It's advertised brilliantly in ladies magazines. Don't spend all your time at a hot stove. Buy Gerber baby food. It will make you and your husband happier. They advertise in medical journals and nutrition journals. Doctors prescribe this product for your patients. This is healthy. This is clean and safe.

And consumers like it. The women like it. It becomes very popular during the 1930s, the Great Depression, when money is scarce. And so the fact that the numbers are increasing even during the 1930s is

pretty amazing. They are responding to advertising, they're responding to the product availability, but they also see it as a benefit in their lives. You know, one less thing I have to do, one more thing that will help me do other things rather than stay in the kitchen. And so it's a product that is seen as valued, important, not just like foisted upon the consumer.

Jeremy: Is it also speaking to mothers', maybe, insecurity about feeding their babies?

Amy: It is. It is. Some of the advertising is suggesting, our baby food is better than you could make at home. It's cleaner. It's safer for babies. They're they're hinting at the dangers of preparing your food at home and the fact that there it could spoil. Another aspect is — and this is something that is true, probably over the centuries — is there's a lot of anxiety wrapped up in feeding one's infant. You want to feed the child the proper food, the nourishing food, the food that's going to be safe. And so there's a lot of parenting, nurturing anxiety that's wrapped up in feeding of solid food.

Jeremy: But I wonder to what extent formula milk kind of softened women up to to be ready to feed commercially produced baby food during weaning.

Amy: I do think it made it easier. And you're exactly right that that story had been played out earlier, a couple of decades earlier, with regard to artificial formula. So that did pave the way. But the story of solid food, the importance of solid food, happens in the mid 20th century because infant feeding is changing rapidly both in liquid and solid, in the 20th century. And by the mid 20th century, you're getting most infants, in the United States at least, formula fed. But the introduction of solid food, the age at which it is introduced, is dropping dramatically. And so by the post-war period, as you suggest, the average age of introducing solids is one month, which is pretty amazing.

Jeremy: I don't know ... Is there any easy way to explain why people thought it was a good idea to introduce solid foods at one month of age?

Amy: It's a good question, and a lot of doctors were worried about it. I read a lot of medical journals on the topic. And there was an interesting poll of doctors, paediatricians, in the 1950s and 60s. And

the older doctors were worried about it. The doctors who had been practicing a while did not recommend early feeding of solids, but the younger doctors did, and the feeling was that it was responding to mothers' insistence on feeding their babies earlier, that they wanted to do it, that there was some sort of cachet in feeding your baby solid foods earlier. And that was because advertising made it glamorous. You had advertising — all of the baby food companies — showing very, very tiny infants being fed baby food by very lovely, beautiful coiffed, red lipsticked mothers who looked very fashionable, feeding their tiny infants baby food. And then there was just a feeling like solid food is just better than liquid food. It's healthier. It's more nourishing. My baby will go to sleep better. And there's no evidence that it's not harmful. That evidence, that medical evidence comes out later in the 20th century.

And there's what I think, a post World War Two feeling of American invincibility that's helping fuel this. You know, the United States emerges from World War Two as a country of immense abundance and wealth and power, and part of its power is derived from its cultural superiority, its economic superiority. And that period just has an abundance of material goods available for people. And there's this idea that that's what makes us special. That's the unique, the exceptionalism that makes America powerful. And we can feed our babies in a civilised way. We can feed them solid food because we have the technology and the material available. We can use little silver spoons and special bowls because we have that wealth. We're not like those other countries that we see in the pages of National Geographic, where women are walking around unclothed with their breasts exposed and they're feeding, breastfeeding their babies. We are civilised. I mean, actually, there are discussions about this that I found in the record. And so it's wrapped up unconsciously, I think, in this idea of American exceptionalism and post-war wealth, that we can we feed our babies infant foods because we can. And the older doctors are worried, but they're, you know, not a match for the forces that are demanding it and are approving of it.

Jeremy: It's like, it's your birthright and it starts at birth.

Amy: Exactly, exactly.

Jeremy: So when and why did opinion start to shift towards starting solids later again?

Amy: It shifted as the American gestalt shifted. I think when you move into the 1970s and 80s, that post-war bravado starts to shift a little bit. The United States is in a different place. There's a counterculture that's questioning the status quo. There's medical studies that are starting to emerge showing the relation between diet and health overall, and then pointing to the fact, well, you know, maybe infants are not being served well enough. There's a consumer movement that's questioning the value and the safety of American products. And the women's movement is, I think, contributing. Women are gaining independence, are gaining a sense of themselves. And there are feminists who are demanding more access to education and jobs in the public sphere. But then there's also this rise of what's called natural motherhood, the fact that I am a woman and my femaleness gives me special powers and knowledge in certain areas that I should trust myself. And one of those areas is infant feeding, emphasising avoiding commercial products and just taking a banana and mashing it yourself and feeding your infant. We don't really need bottled, commercialised baby food, is the thinking at that point.

Jeremy: But aside from the argument about when to start solid foods and weaning, what are the differences between commercial baby food and the stuff you can make at home? Not just mashing a banana, but maybe pureeing what everybody else is eating.

Amy: When canned food was developed and commercialised, the canners ... You know, to can food safely, you have to do a lot to it. You have to sterilise the food as much as possible. You have to prepare those foods and cook them at very, very high temperatures to kill all the harmful bacteria. And when you do that, it changes. It compromises all of the qualities of food. It compromises the aroma, the texture, the appearance, the vitamins, the nutrients. And so canners had to add things back to make that food palatable and acceptable to the general public. And so they would add things like salt, sugar, preservatives to maintain its integrity, stabilisers to prevent the liquid from separating from the solid, artificial colours, artificial flavours. And so you have the beginning of all of those additives in processed food to make them look and taste and function like food that wasn't canned and cooked and sterilised at a very, very high temperature. And they did that with both regular produce and also infants' produce as well. So you had baby food being manufactured in that same way. A lot of added sugar, a lot of added salt, artificial

colours, artificial preservatives. There were products like baby food, desserts that were made. And that all seemed fine.

And, you know, their real target were mothers, who would probably taste that baby food and if it didn't taste like they thought it should, then they were not necessarily going to buy it. And so in the 1970s, when you have this change in approach to food and corporations and government oversight, you have an understanding that food maybe should not have all of those things, and especially baby food.

Jeremy: Is there possibly an argument that commercial baby foods may be good for babies because adults and older children are eating actually a significantly less diverse and probably less nutritious diet.

Amy: Absolutely. There are studies in the early 2000s, there are really important studies that are done. And one of the really amazing findings is that these commercial products are allowing infants to eat a greater variety of fruits and vegetables at the appropriate age. Babies who are fed commercial baby food are actually exposed to a greater variety of fruits and vegetables, which of course is good. And if you think about it, the Americans are not good vegetable eaters. I think 1 in 10 Americans eats the recommended number of five fruits and vegetables a day. And most of the vegetables that Americans do eat are potatoes or tomatoes. And if you dig a little bit deeper into the data, the potatoes are usually in the form of French fries or potato chips, and the tomatoes are in the form of ketchup or tomato sauce that's used on pizza or pasta. So not a very good, sterling record for Americans in their fruits and vegetables eating.

So if you are a family that eats a variety of fruits and vegetables naturally, and it's just part of your family meal, and your child is going to grow up in an environment that's exposed to a lot of different kinds of fruits and vegetables, that's very, very different than the majority of Americans who eat a very, very limited number of fruits and vegetables. And an infant grows up in that environment. So if you feed your child jarred baby food, it's very easy to grab a jar of squash or a jar of sweet potatoes, or try a little bit of this or that. Once you get those families move off infant commercial baby food, you watch the data move on to potatoes and tomatoes, and so you can almost imagine those babies being fed more processed foods, happy meals at McDonald's, you know, other kinds of feeding habits that are less conducive to health.

Jeremy: And what kind of impact does the food a baby eats, what kind of an impact does that have on its later food preferences?

Amy: This is a really important point and question because the early introduction of solids to an infant, for the first few weeks to the first handful of months, it's not about nutrition. It's about introducing taste and texture and a variety of foods to an infant. The infant is still getting the majority of nutrition from breast milk or formula. It's really about acclimating that child to what food means. Let me give you a couple of examples.

So if a baby is only fed white food as first foods, white rice, cereal, bananas, applesauce, rusks, all of that is food, but the baby is learning that food is white and food is by and large mushy. So for that infant food is white, it's mushy and it's sweet. And then moving on, it becomes more and more of a challenge to think of a bright orange vegetable as food, or a bright green cruciferous vegetable as food. And so a baby is going to be ... Or a spicy food. And so if you expose, in early introduction of solids, your child to an array of colours of food, array of textures, array of presentations, that baby is going to understand that food comes in all sorts of colours, all sorts of shapes, all sorts of flavour profiles. And that's going to be, the theory goes, better for an infant's food consumption and nutrition down the line. Now of course, an infant, a child, can learn, you know, at age ten that food comes in all these shapes and sizes and become a quote unquote good eater. But if you start a child out introducing them to an array of colours and shapes and textures, it's going to, the theory goes, be better for overall health and nutrition.

Jeremy: Yeah. And as for the ten year old learning to being taught to enjoy ... It sounds sounds a bit like a sensitive period, like for learning languages. I mean, it's much, much easier to learn a language at three years old than it is at 30 years old.

Amy: Also what environment the child is entering into. And so that is just hugely important. You know, just watching the people around them eat, enjoy, talk about, value food. That is just tremendous learning time for children. So it's the tasting but it's also the environment that the children is eating in.

Jeremy: I have to ask you about the latest baby food scandal in the US, the lead poisoning that's been associated with these cinnamon-flavoured applesauce in pouches. And I've also heard that young

children, given lots of these pouches of mushy food, are developing problems with their teeth and their ability even to chew. So are we maybe with this technological advancement, are we storing up another set of problems?

Amy: I think so. Potentially, yes. When baby food was first commercialised, it came in little tin cans, like other fruits and vegetables that were canned. And eventually the baby food makers switched to little glass jars. Because parents really like to look at the product, they wanted to know what was inside. They wanted to know what the colour looked like, and that was very reassuring to parents. So for most of the 20th century, baby food came in little glass jars. But in the 2000, 2010, the technology changed to these pouches and those became very, very popular. They were seen as an improvement upon the glass jars, even more portable, less breakage. And you could just whip off the top of one of those pouches and hand it to your kid if it's old enough. And the kid could just kind of suck it like a milkshake or something. That had its advantages and disadvantages.

A similar advantage to the longer story of baby food: convenience, innovation, modernity. But it has its downside. It even further distances a parent from the act of feeding the child. Before, you needed a spoon or you needed a highchair, you needed to kind of watch that child. Now, you don't necessarily even need to watch the child. You just hand them the pouch and if the child is old enough they can do it themselves. All that food in the mouth is terrible for teeth. And so paediatric dentists were very, very worried and have seen increased tooth decay as a result of the pouches and so worry about that, caution against that.

It also extends the months or years that a family buys baby food because it kind of turns into a toddler food as well. And that's very good for baby food companies. Baby food has a limited appeal to parents and a limited time period in which they're going to buy it because after, what, seven, eight, nine months a baby transitions to table food. And so these pouches essentially extend the product as an option for families into toddlerhood because it can be used like a snack for toddlers. So that is very attractive to the baby food companies. But there are definitely downsides.

And then, as you mentioned, the scandal of high levels of lead being in applesauce in a pouch is the latest food scare for parents and baby

food. And this is very common. This has happened over the centuries. It's been one thing or another in baby food products especially, which feels especially shocking because babies are so vulnerable. And again, parents are responsible for feeding those children and letting a product that's compromised into your children's body feels very shocking and anxiety producing. And so this periodically happens in baby food. And a few years ago, it was arsenic in white rice cereal. And today it's the lead and the cinnamon in the applesauce pouches. And so periodically parents are reminded, oh, these products, while generally safe, it's never a guarantee.

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