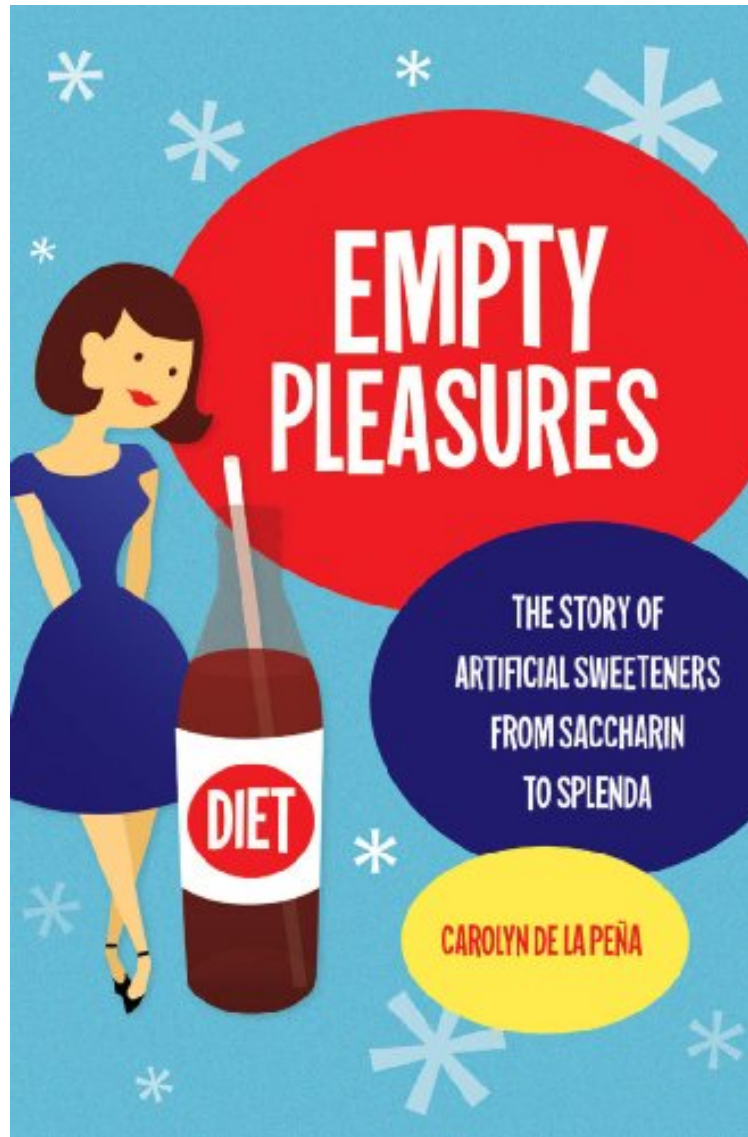


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Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda

Carolyn de la Pentilde;a
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Carolyn de la Pentilde;a : Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda:

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I'm a long-time a consumer of artificial sweeteners. Except for baking, I've pretty much given up sugar. I habitually reach for the "pink stuff" to sweeten my coffee and tea, I sprinkle Splenda on my morning cereal, and I choose diet sodas that are sweetened with NutraSweet. Now, after reading *Empty Pleasures*, I understand more about the why and how of these food habits--and not just mine, but those of most American consumers. Carolyn De La Pentilde;a has given me something to think about.

Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda explores an important and completely overlooked chapter in America's food history: how and why and in less than three decades, consumers changed from craving sugar to rejecting it in favor of the seductive pleasures of artificial sweeteners. The book is a powerfully engaging and (for the most part) highly readable narrative that tells the story of Americans' growing acceptance of sweet-tasting food products and outlines the development of artificial sweeteners, their impacts on the food industry, and the cultural implications of our changing food preferences. During the early twentieth century, sugar was promoted as a healthful food that contributed calories and energy in often nutritive-poor diets. As a result, consumers refused to accept such commercial products as soft drinks in which the cheaper new chemical, saccharin, was substituted (without their knowledge) for the more expensive sugar. What--it wasn't really sugar? Consumers felt cheated, and manufacturers were forced to return to their customers' preferred sweetener. But in the postwar 40s and 50s, consumers' preferences began to change, spurred by women's growing interest in becoming slim and sexy. Saccharin (manufactured by Monsanto Chemical) and the new cyclamate were viewed as important sugar-substitutes, especially after new food products such as canned "diet" fruits were developed and the mass marketing of these products encouraged consumers to see them as part of a healthy "reducing" diet. When the FDA threatened to ban saccharin in 1977, consumers rose to its defense, and the age of artificial sweeteners took on a newly energetic life, even further encouraged by the "diet entrepreneurs," such as Tillie Lewis, Jean Nidetch, Weight Watchers, and Jenny Craig. Throughout the book, De La Pentilde;a makes her thesis clear. It isn't that artificial sweeteners are "bad" for you, for there is no scientific evidence to prove their harm. But it is beginning to seem possible that we are not entirely satiated by these chemically de-calorized products and more likely to reach for another food. We have lost control of our appetites; we have become addicted to sweet-tasting chemicals; and we have allowed ourselves to be manipulated by the food industry and marketers. The real benefits of these "empty pleasures" accrue to the huge conglomerates that own these chemicals: to Monsanto, for instance, which now produces saccharin, Splenda, and NutraSweet. Artificial sweeteners, De la Pentilde;a says, have proved to be a superb, low-cost way "to move products through consumers by removing barriers to capacity." That is, if we don't have to count the calories in what we consume (and therefore risk additional pounds), we can eat as much as we want--although of course we have to buy it first. De la Pentilde;a: "The ability of the low-calorie market to expand the total market for American foods is surely proof of the ingenuity of capitalism, whether you admire or decry the results." Perhaps even more importantly, artificial sweeteners teach us that it is indeed possible to get something for nothing, a strongly negative lesson for a high-consuming society. They are another encouragement for us to keep thoughtlessly, mindlessly stuffing ourselves with things that have no real or lasting or significant value. In accepting the false promise of the artificial sweetener industry, we have also accepted the false idea of the Free Lunch: we can consume as much as we want of anything we choose and never have to pay the price. The real price.

This book will not help you decide whether to switch from "pink" to "blue" or go back to sugar. Instead, *Empty Pleasures* is designed to help you understand the history and development of these sweet chemical products, the processed foods that are based on them, and the industries and corporations that have profited by exploiting our cravings for sweets. But in the end and all things considered, De La Pentilde;a concludes that artificial sweeteners are unhealthy for us as a society, for they have blurred the distinction between food and "nutraceuticals" and have made it nearly impossible for us to observe, evaluate, and control our appetites. Strongly recommended for general readers who are interested in changes in the American diet and in their own food choices and for collections that focus on the history of industrial food.

by Susan Wittig Albert for Story Circle Book Reviews

reviewing books by, for, and about women

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Artificial sweeteners from a sociological perspective

By William Young

This book focuses on the promoters and promotees of artificial sweeteners for the greater part of the Twentieth Century. From the period in which the first commercial sweetener saccharin was considered adulterants (secretly substituted to some degree for more expensive sugar) in an era when sugar was wholesome and nutritious, Ms. de la Pentilde;a takes the narrative full circle, especially focusing on the fight to salvage saccharin (led by weight-conscious people -- primarily women -- and the industry-supported Calorie Control Council) when it was almost removed from the market after cancer developed in rats fed huge amounts of the substance. (The Delaney Clause -- the 1958 amendment to the Food, Drugs, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 -- forbade the FDA approval of a substance shown to cause cancer in man or other animals.) She offers many new insights into the woman's role in food selection for the family, a process in which the homemaker exercised considerable control in the period well before "women's lib." While some in the food industry were early champions of artificial sweeteners (saccharin and cyclamates) in the 1950s and 1960s, it's refreshing to know that others were concerned about safety despite their commercial success. She also analyzed the triumphant NutraSweet and how its marketing -- from both the producer's perspective and that of the food industry -- reaching the conclusion that creativity and, to use my word, manipulation, were both instrumental. However, some chapters grew excessively long,

almost repetitive in some cases. Moreover, there were several factual errors and omissions. For example, the author notes that Love Canal was in New Jersey. She stated that Monsanto bought the NutraSweet Company; in actuality, Monsanto purchased G.D. Searle, of which NutraSweet was a division. As this might be considered a technicality to some, Monsanto's prime reason for the acquisition was to procure Searle's pharmaceutical business, not NutraSweet, whose famous sweetener admittedly was grabbing market share from saccharin, one of Monsanto's first products. While cyclamates were removed from the market due to the "cancer in rats" phenomenon, Ms. de la Pena didn't fully explain why this didn't provoke a meaningful outcry (as it did for saccharin several years later) or discuss the fact that cyclamates are still available in dozens of countries, including as an ingredient in diet soft drinks. Nor did she present a broader history of the Delaney Clause, not mentioning that it was ultimately discredited and ultimately overturned by Congress. While the author did focus on sucralose (OK'd by the FDA in 1998), she omitted mention of acesulfame-K, a commercially successful sweetener that was approved by the FDA in 1989 and still finds widespread use today around the world.

Sugar substitutes have been a part of American life since saccharin was introduced at the 1893 World's Fair. In *Empty Pleasures*, the first history of artificial sweeteners in the United States, Carolyn de la Pena blends popular culture with business and women's history, examining the invention, production, marketing, regulation, and consumption of sugar substitutes such as saccharin, Sucaryl, NutraSweet, and Splenda. She describes how saccharin, an accidental laboratory by-product, was transformed from a perceived adulterant into a healthy ingredient. As food producers and pharmaceutical companies worked together to create diet products, savvy women's magazine writers and editors promoted artificially sweetened foods as ideal, modern weight-loss aids, and early diet-plan entrepreneurs built menus and fortunes around pleasurable dieting made possible by artificial sweeteners. NutraSweet, Splenda, and their predecessors have enjoyed enormous success by promising that Americans, especially women, can "have their cake and eat it too," but *Empty Pleasures* argues that these "sweet cheats" have fostered troubling and unsustainable eating habits and that the promises of artificial sweeteners are ultimately too good to be true.

[De la Pena] is diligent, mostly even-handed and non-polemical.--National This book does an excellent job of exploring the contested history of artificial sweeteners and their use in packaged food and drink. In de la Pena's hands these substances become windows onto important aspects of the American experience.--American Historical Empty Pleasures is full of insights about artificial sweeteners.--Gastronomica Fascinating.--The New Yorker "Book Bench" blog Powerfully engaging . . . [a] highly readable narrative. . . . Strongly recommended for general readers who are interested in changes in the American diet and in their own food choices and for collections that focus on the history of industrial food.--Story Circle Book sAn insightful, multidisciplinary work particularly attractive to students of American studies.--Journal of American History A welcome and an enlightening examination of consumption and its consequences.--PopMatters A well-cited, thought-provoking, and fascinating analysis of the sociological, psychological, political, and financial underpinnings of the promotion and use of artificial sweeteners in the U.S. . . . Highly Recommended--Choice Carolyn de la Pena conducts a thorough review of artificial sweeteners and how their role and perception have changed over the years.--Wilmington Star-News In its most intriguing chapter, the book details the "saccharin rebellion" . . . [which] reveals much about ordinary Americans' perceptions of pleasure in a risk-filled world.--A Nota Bene selection of The Chronicle of Higher Education Absolutely fascinating. . . . This is not a book that scolds you for your gum habit or insists that drinking diet soda will cause you to put on pounds in the long term. Rather, it is a well-written guide to the history and development of a product that permanently changed our meal preparation, our manufacturing system, and our self-perception.--SeriousEats.com De la Pena's substantial skills as a social and cultural historian are on fine display. . . . Illuminating discussion. . . . Offers a too rare glimpse of how the business of chemistry actually works.--Chemical Engineering News Charming and exhaustively researched, de la Pena's exploration provides a fascinating look into a seemingly commonplace food additive.--ForeWord Magazine In this cultural history, de la Pena shows how everyone from scientists to food conglomerates to ad agencies to women's magazines have conspired to make Americans believe we can have our sweets and eat them too.--BarnesandNoble.com At a time when we are overwhelmed by a million studies about the purported 'obesity epidemic,' Carolyn de la Pena's extraordinary book comes along as a refreshing historical perspective on dieting practices, commercial opportunism, and the social construction of 'expert' authority. This gracefully written study offers a bracing antidote to the food industry's craze for nutraceuticals, functional foods, and other technological fixes for public health problems.--Warren Belasco, author of *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* *Empty Pleasures*, a rich and rewarding read, makes the tools of cultural analysis available to a wide range of readers. De la Pena's argument, that artificial sweeteners provide consumers with a way to exercise 'indulgent restraint,' will surely re-energize scholarly and policy discussions of the American diet.--Jennifer Scanlon, author of *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* *Empty Pleasures* provides a fascinating window into the complex history of artificial sweeteners in the United States, blending business history with discussions about how these products actually worked within the lives of consumers. An in-depth, nuanced study.--Amy Farrell, author of *Yours in*

Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism
From the Inside Flap
In *Empty Pleasures*, the first history of artificial sweeteners in the United States, Carolyn de la Pena blends popular culture with business and women's history, shedding light on the invention, production, marketing, regulation, and consumption of sugar substitutes such as saccharin, Sucaryl, NutraSweet, and Splenda. These companies have enjoyed enormous success by promising that Americans can "have their cake and eat it too," but *Empty Pleasures* argues both that these "sweet cheats" have fostered troubling and unsustainable eating habits and are ultimately too good to be true.