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Food Additives: Blame Hitler - PW Talks with Stephan Eirik Clark



By Judi Goldenberg | Jul 25, 2014

Clark's debut novel, *Sweetness #9*, serves up tasty tidbits and hard-to-swallow truths about the food we eat, as it traces the development of Sweetener #9 from Hitler's bunker into every facet of the American diet.

What did you have for breakfast today? Did writing a novel about what we eat change your eating habits?

When I started this novel, I was single and ate a lot of microwaveable food. I was trying to eat better—buying organic, avoiding certain ingredients—but every few months I'd find myself in the back booth of the local KFC,

not quite sure how my cheeks got covered with grease. Today, my lapses are less frequent. This morning, while getting my toddler and five-year-old fed, I ate a hastily-cut chunk of Trader Joe's cinnamon coffee cake; after things calmed down, I had a slice of Havarti cheese on a piece of light rye crisp bread.

Why write about a flavor chemist and his family?

For the longest time I didn't give any thought to natural and artificial flavorings. But then I read *Fast Food Nation*. Wanting to explore the secretive flavor chemistry industry more, I dreamed up David Leveraux. The novel is Leveraux's memoir.

To look at food from a variety of perspectives, it seemed natural to put a family at the center. Is there a social group more likely to bring together people with conflicting food preferences?

Talk about the connections you see between artificial flavorings and the ills of western civilization.

If one word could summarize a host of social and political problems today, it'd probably be denial. We're in denial about the health of the environment, the state of the economy, about racism and sexism and the existence of the police state—denial. What is the use of flavor additives if not a willful deception of the public that allows us to deny the unpalatable truth? Don't get me wrong—I think flavorists are artists, their work incredibly imaginative and creative. But take away the flavorings and other additives in our processed foods and you have an unpalatable truth. Keep them, and you can convince people they're eating healthy, nutritious food—even when they're not.

Have you ever worked in an animal testing lab?

I visited a couple of flavor creation houses. I never stepped inside an animal-testing lab, and certainly never worked in one. I chose to start the book there so that Sweetness #9 could serve as a stand-in for all of the fears and anxieties we have about food today.

Where do fact and fiction intersect?

As far as I know, Hitler didn't have a flavor chemist in his bunker. That didn't stop me from putting one there. His inclusion allows me to develop the ideas and questions I want the reader to consider. That's the only limit I place on the inclusion of fictional and nonfictional elements—that they contribute to a better whole.