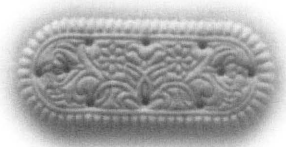
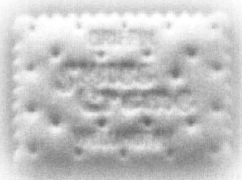


The Restau at This End of the Universe : Edible in New Zeala



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Visible Language, 34.2
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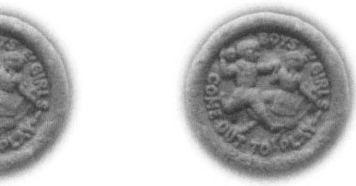
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SYDNEY J. SHEP

Typography

Large-scale food signage occupies a significant place in the landscape of New Zealand popular culture. As advertising billboard, it charms, distracts, and sells; as roadside marker, it enables simple or complex locating behavior; as outdoor sculptural installation, it functions as tourist commodity, identifying place with the sustainable objects of primary production. This paper examines the role of typography embedded on, dislocated from, and replaced by, edible foodstuffs in the production and consumption of visual culture. It questions why typography is placed on an edible substrate which, when consumed, facilitates both the acquisition of knowledge and its reprocessing into the communication practices of speech and writing. It explores why removable object labeling and separable packaging destabilize this integral and integrated association between food and knowledge, opening up a(n) in/visible space for the manipulation of desire and the politics of dissimulation. And finally, it traces the impulse to replace type with radically over-sized, non-edible representations of edible foodstuffs to create a virtual landscape of timeless, unsatisfied desire.

If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food. Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation.¹



Cocktails

I'd like to open with a rather famous literary example. At the beginning of her fantastic adventures, Alice falls down a rabbit hole, wanders down a long passage, and comes upon a long, low hall with a single piece of furniture upon which sits a golden key. The key opens a little door to an even smaller passage leading to a lovely garden, tantalizingly all just out of reach for an obviously oversized Alice. We'll let Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson continue the story:

There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table, half hoping that she might find another key on it, or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes: this time she found a little bottle on it ("which certainly was not here before," said Alice), and tied around the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words, "DRINK ME" beautifully printed on it in large letters. It was all very well to say "Drink me," but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. "No, I'll look first," she said, "and see whether it's marked '*poison*' or not"; for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked "*poison*," it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

However, this bottle was *not* marked "*poison*," so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it *very* nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast), she very soon finished it off.²

Signalled by the typographical lacunae of asterisks, Alice drinks the cordial, shrinks to fit through the door, but has forgotten the key, now languishing just out of reach for a now obviously undersized Alice.

Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake on which the words "EAT ME" were beautifully marked in currants. "Well, I'll eat it," said Alice, "and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!"³

In both instances, the agent of physical transformation is food, the cue for that transformation mediated by beautiful writing. But note the difference between the two typographically rendered injunctions: "DRINK ME" \neq "Eat Me." The first is hand-rendered by that visual genius of *Punch*, Sir John Tenniel, in Victorian ornamented capitals with lachrymal terminals verging on the bulbous. "DRINK ME" is printed on a label loosely attached to an otherwise undistinguished bottle (SEE FIGURE 1). In consuming the liquid,



FIGURE 1
"DRINK ME."
(Sir John Tenniel, Lewis Carroll.
Alice in Wonderland.)

both bottle and label remain as evidence of that consumption; the liquid itself is identity-less. Alice's caution in partaking of the mysterious liquid proves she has learned her lessons well. Patent medicines were among the first labeled products, a legal requirement from the late seventeenth century in England, with duty payable on each separately branded item.⁴ Given the dubious properties of many of them, the fantastic claims to cure anything from constipation to frigidity, and the ease with which the 'medicine' could be separated from its package, "DRINK ME" was a fairly ambiguous message. However, Alice exhibits no such caution when faced with the words "Eat Me" picked out in currants on the cake. It is as if the product endorsement is self-evident; words inseparable from, and indeed baked into the foodstuff, have an incontestable truth quotient. The brand is the product; the contract between producer and consumer is linear and transparent. And, as if the words are not self-evident enough, Tenniel feels no obligation to depict the very small cake, beautifully marked in currants, decorated according to taste.

Whether she eats or drinks, Alice embarks upon a physical transformation which enables if not symbolizes access to new experiences and knowledge. A female, a garden and food all conjure up visions of Eve, Paradise and the apple. But rather than presented with an extra-textual serpent inciting the fall by orally persuading alimentary and metaphorical consumption from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Alice is initially confronted with writing, after having fallen, down the rabbit hole. Her own encounter with the serpent occurs later in the piece when she meets a hookah-smoking caterpillar regally mounted on (for Alice, anyway) an oversized mushroom (SEE FIGURE 2). In this instance writing is no longer the passport to knowledge, but has, in fact, destabilized an Alice who cannot now answer even the simplest question of the caterpillar's catechism, "Who are *you*?" The caterpillar's cryptic advice "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter"⁵ infuriates Alice with its imprecision, particularly as the caterpillar, by moving off

the object he refers to, severs the direct connection between his speech and his referent. Unlike her previous encounters with writing articulated in the imperative, this confusing verbal rhetorical balancing act opens a space for interpretation and misinterpretation. Such ambiguity was erased in Walt Disney's animated version (1951) in which the Caterpillar's words were graphically though ephemerally rendered by multicoloured smoke rings which took the form of letters and things.⁶



FIGURE 2
Caterpillar.
(Sir John Tenniel, Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland.*)

These examples from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offer three semiotic models of the relationship between food as/and knowledge and food and/as communication. A bottle with an attached paper label "DRINK ME" and a cake with "Eat Me" written in baked-on currants represent two models of how we perceive, read and thus consume the world. When type is replaced by speech, in an inversion of the traditional progress of language, the word is made flesh in the shape of an oversized mushroom and the edible substrate itself becomes the communication medium.

The sociology of food has, in recent years, become a fashionable field of critical inquiry. Anthropologists, historians, nutritionists and philosophers have joined sociologists in scrutinizing cultures of eating, notions of taste and the historical development of cuisines. A notable cast of characters has been summoned to the disciplinary redoubt: from Roland Barthes' early structuralist model of a grammar of food (incomplete and foresworn later in his post-structuralist career) to Claude Lévi-Strauss and his linguistic analysis of Amerindian food systems; from Michel Foucault's exploration of writing and the body to Mary Douglas's study of food as a sophisticated interpersonal and intercultural form of ritual communication. From the mid-1980s, developmentalists such as Martin Harris, Jack Goody, Stephen Mennell and Sidney Mintz have moved away from a specifically structuralist framework to situate food in historical, evolutionary, economic and political contexts underpinned with a recognition of nutritional needs and cultural meanings.⁷ However, although Terry Eagleton points out that "edible écriture"⁸ or the relationship between eating and writing permeates our linguistic landscape of gastronomical metaphors, the role of typography in this relationship has been, à la Beatrice Warde, a crystal goblet – transparent and invisible.



Appetizers

So, what is the relation of food to knowledge and what does it mean to place typography on an edible substrate? To answer the first, we'll have to enter the land of milk and honey, then cleanse the palate with a morsel of fruit. To answer the second, we'll have to wait for the main course.

In medieval Jewish society, the Feast of Shavuot marked the initiation of the child into the rituals of learning to read.

The boy about to be initiated was wrapped in a prayer shawl and taken by his father to the teacher. The teacher sat the boy on his lap and showed him a slate on which were written the Hebrew alphabet, a passage from the Scriptures and the words 'May the Torah be your occupation.' The teacher read out every word and the child repeated it. Then the slate was covered with honey and the child licked it, thereby bodily assimilating the holy words. Also biblical verses were written on peeled hard-boiled eggs and on honey cakes, which the child would eat after reading the verses out loud to the teacher.⁹

This celebration combines the reading of words with the physical consumption of language and the digestion of their import. In the process, the potential for knowledge is transferred via that organ of liminality synonymous with eating and speaking – the mouth – to be re-articulated in the vocal repetitions of Torah learning. The use of food to reward knowledge acquisition is as common as withholding food as punishment. Similarly, the force-feeding of language (eat my words) or the re-ingestion of bad words when the decorum of utterance is transgressed entails cleansing the utensils of food preparation (washing the mouth out with soap).

Now, learning with honey-coated horn books in a later period, may have proved an effective way to promote knowledge, but somehow the idea didn't catch on. Honey-coated breakfast cereals of the twentieth century replete with the saturation of cereal box packaging surfaces are probably the closest preparation for the classroom reading ritual that we have today. Another edible foodstuff, however, did provide an inducement to reading: gingerbread. Originally made of rye-flour, spices (including ginger) and honey, slabs of "book" gingerbread impressed with the alphabet were used to teach, then reward children for mastering their letters in northern Europe and England in particular from at least the fourteenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth (SEE FIGURE 3). Some of these "books" were shaped like the traditional hornbook, complete with handle, though not accompanied by the "wit-pricker" or stylus used for tracing the letters. Others were square slabs with pre-scored sections which could be broken off letter by embossed letter, much like the modern chocolate bar. Pictorial, emblematic and figural moulds were also used, some recording significant historical events, others illustrating popular storybook and nursery rhyme characters.

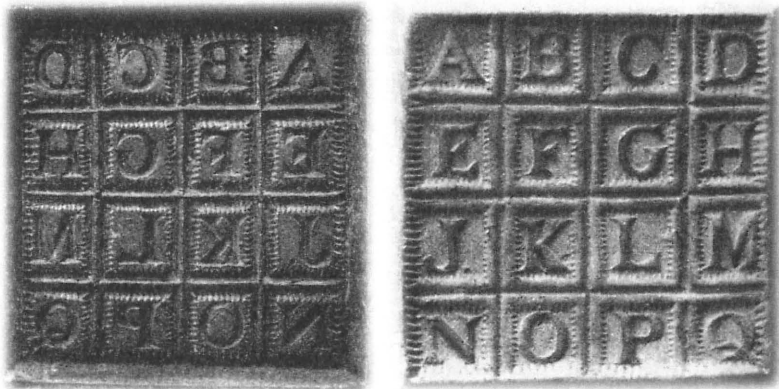


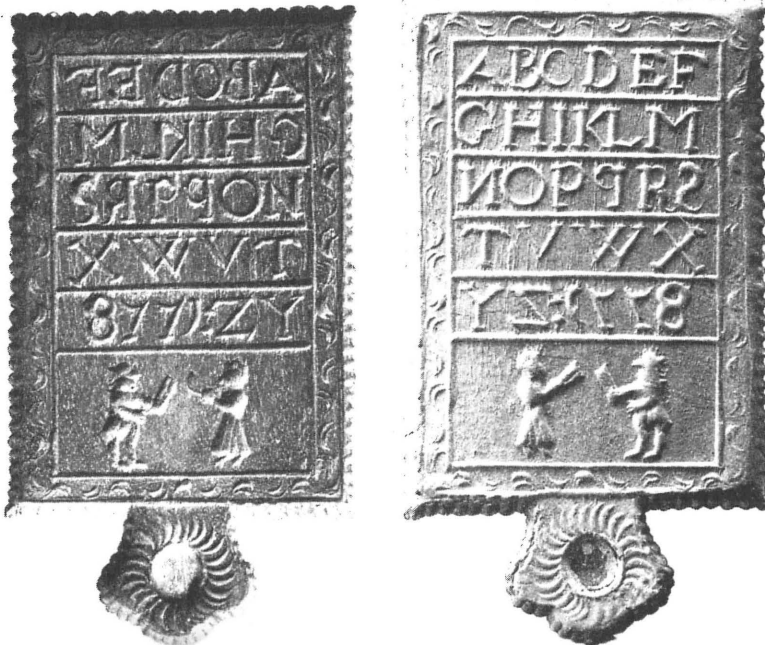
FIGURE 3
*Specimens of moulds and biscuits of book gingerbread,
circa 18th century Holland and England.*
(Tuer. 1897, *History of the Hornbook*, 440, 441)

Many of the more expensive and elaborate forms of white (as opposed to 'red' or common) gingerbread were gilded as a special treat or for the banquet table. In 1721, Matthew Prior versified the relationship between learning and eating:

To Master John the English Maid
A Horn-book gives of Ginger-bread:
And that the Child may learn the better,
As he can name, he eats the Letter:
Proceeding thus with vast Delight,
He spells, and gnaws from Left to Right.

Similarly, an anonymous writer from around 1835 remarked:

The bakers to increase their trade
Made alphabets of gingerbread,
That folks might swallow what they read,
All the letters were digested,
Hateful ignorance detested.¹⁰



I know of no study which highlights the role of the baker in shaping educational practice and promoting the dissemination of knowledge. Significantly perhaps, bakers were named as one of the desirable immigrant classes given free passage to New Zealand in the nineteenth century along with carpenters, agricultural labourers and domestic servants; anyone involved in the knowledge industry (such as printers, papermakers, bookbinders, stationers and even schoolteachers) were not included. However, the dark side of the baker's art is rarely addressed. Hansel and Gretel stumble upon a gingerbread house in a dark wood; by eating this confection, they are rewarded with the knowledge of terror and cannibalism.¹¹

The synonymy of food and knowledge is deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Eucharist, that cornerstone of Christianity, the transubstantiation relies upon the recognition of the symbolic relationship between (indeed, the identity of) the comestibles of bread and wine and the word made flesh in the shape of the body and blood of the man/god, Jesus Christ. Alimentary signification resonates in the Old Testament as well. Adam and Eve, for example, discovered the consequences of mis-reading when they ate the forbidden fruit, that emblem of the knowledge of good and evil, a symbol loaded with one meaning by God, and re-interpreted with another meaning by the tongue of an eloquent serpent. Despite being in the shape of a familiar object, the apple required an extra-alimentary text, a kind of "DRINK ME" label attached to but separable from the edible object; and perhaps it was this separation of text from object, signified and signifier, which catalyzed the fall. But, what if the apple had had "eat me" written or carved on it? What if ENZA, the New Zealand Apple and Pear Marketing Board had had its evil way?

It's time to cleanse the palate.

The pip and stonefruit industry of New Zealand has a long history of product identification. Apples, pears, peaches and the like were sold loose from the barrel or crate in the local grocers, but required more authoritative and authenticating labeling when exported overseas. The wooden crate with its highly colourful label is a testimonial to branding ingenuity (SEE FIGURE 4). The Auckland Farmers' Freezing Company Limited produced an annual guide to the cooperative's rules on everything from freezing to branding fruit cases. In the 1929–30 edition, they complained that "there is much difficulty in delivering fruit as required owing to submarks sometimes being so indistinct and small as to be difficult to find." The solution was as follows: "it is essential that the owner's name or number, also the name of the variety and size of the fruit should be stenciled on both ends of the case in letters not less than one inch in length, in black ink."¹² This over-exuberance of printing and stenciling did not pre-empt the government inspectors who regularly pried open cases to confirm and clear the commodities contained therein before sending them overseas (SEE FIGURE 5).



FIGURE 4
Two fruit cases for export market with color lithographed labels circa 1940–60 (private collection)

FIGURE 5
New Zealand Government fruit inspectors at work inspecting apples. ("Making New Zealand Collection," photographer L.W. Tiller, reference number C-23548-Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

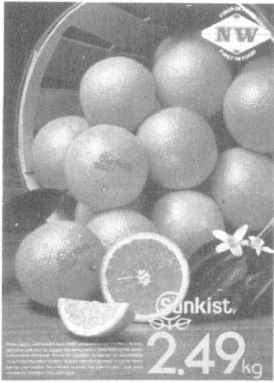


FIGURE 6
Sunkist orange advertisement.
New World Supermarkets 1987.
(reference number
Eph-B-FOOD-Shop-1987-01
Alexander Turnbull Library,
Wellington, New Zealand.)

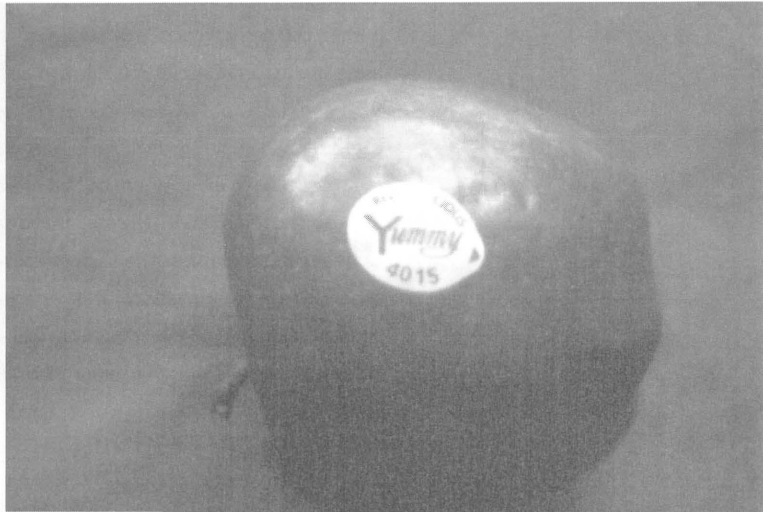
The next step was obvious as New Zealand moved from “DRINK ME” towards “Eat me” labeling. Unlike citrus fruits which could be physically branded with the corporate mark by being stamped with an impregnating dye (SEE FIGURE 6), apples and pears required stick-on labels, made firstly of paper, now plastic, the latter hopeless for recycling in the compost bin. Labels today include variety name and grower name or number, and at times a slogan or jingle (SEE FIGURE 7). Now, I don’t know about you, but how many times when you go to the supermarket are you insulted by this labelling strategy? You know what an apple is; you know what a Braeburn or a Pacific Rose, or a Delicious looks like. Do you really have to be told that it’s “Yummy” (SEE FIGURE 8) or “Ripe for Tonight?” Why does such knowledge have to be shoved in your face – on every single piece of fruit? Have we lost all our botanical lore as well as our ability to identify the subjects / objects of consumption, the relationship between visual recognition and taste buds now severed irrevocably? Are we the “export” market monkeys for fruit? Are we so suspicious of the tamper-potential of modern self-serve shopping that these marks of authentication are now also required for the domestic market? Are Nature’s foodstuffs now overwritten with simple linguistic cues, creating an alphabetic primer for the illiterate, indoctrinating the consumer into the ritual of reading? Or is it all part of a complex branding exercise?

FIGURE 7
Labeled fruit, New Zealand 1998.



Paracelsus, that medieval philosopher, medical practitioner and cosmologist, divided the world into three books: the book of God, the book of nature and the book of man. He believed that if we looked hard enough, we could see the hand of God inscribed on the natural world in the form of a language of letters which often corresponded to marks inscribed on man in the language of physiognomy. This physical branding meant an unambiguous identification of the object. However, criminals, dissemblers and women were much harder to read as they appropriated and subverted the language of identification and thus representation for their own purposes. Product branding operates in a similar fashion. "Brands are like letters. They can be transformed into symbols. They can become shorthand ways of communicating. ... Symbols come to stand for other things in our minds and the act of consuming a brand can become a symbolic way for us to express our identification with the entities associated with it."¹³ Are we taken in with what Daniel Boorstin called the "advertising penumbra," that blurring of form, content and reputation as well as that blurring of wants, needs and functions? If à la Emerson, "a commodity is the length and shadow of an ad," then Boorstin argues that "the advertising penumbra is surely one of the ways which our experiences and our feelings about any commodity is made more like any other. The specificity of the product is increasingly lost in the image of the package, its trademark, and its reputation."¹⁴

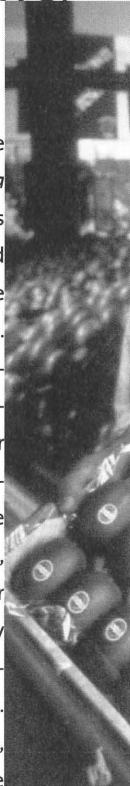
FIGURE 8
"Yummy" contemporary fruit label,
New Zealand 1998.



So, are we actually eating an apple whether it be Braeburn, Pacific Rose or Delicious, or are we eating a symbol? If the latter, are we back to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden? You may well wonder! In 1998, a Gisborne fruitgrower developed a revolutionary technique for growing corporate symbols in his products. Imagine, Sheraton Hotels serving apples and pears with their own logo not on the paring knife, the silver tray, or the monogrammed serviette, but firmly and inseparably part of the flesh of the fruit. Product/genetic engineering at its transformative best? Next step, bar codes grown in and on the skin. The symbolic value of the comestible erases the primary alimentary identity.

“Who can possibly estimate the hidden power of actually eating a corporate logo?”¹⁵

Admittedly, some fruit does require typographical assistance. The classic example is the New Zealand kiwifruit, the humble *Actinida chinensis*, which has suffered from an identity crisis ever since its introduction (SEE FIGURE 9). In 1959, the New Zealand fruit and vegetable cooperative, Turners and Growers, met to deal with the problem of the “chinese gooseberry” as it was initially marketed. In the aftermath of World War II, the potentially lucrative American market was suspicious of anything “chinese” and to add insult to injury, gooseberries were taxed at a considerably higher import duty than uncategorized fruit.¹⁶ Putting two and two together, the company coined “kiwifruit” and launched into the most successful horticultural boom of all time. In the mid 1980s, the boom bust for two reasons: technology sharing with other countries, which left little or no export demand; and the ability to forge little paper labels which had hitherto identified this unassuming fuzzy fruit with the green inside as “authentically” Kiwi. Once the brand equity of the symbolic name declined in value, a new name was invented and repackaging of the chinese gooseberry began all over again. Market research revealed that the name “Zespri” won out hands down (SEE FIGURE 10). Why?



Nothing to do with New Zealand, or even with a horticultural product. “Zespri” connotes cool, youthful, full of zest, a little zing, a lot of esprit. So too are wine spritzers, deodorant and toothpaste. Time will tell with this re-branding strategy. In the interim, the product itself is being re-engineered almost beyond recognition. The newest *Actinida* on the block is a yellow-fleshed variety. The identity stamp “Hort 16A, New Variety Class II” parades ambiguously and spuriously on the back of the Zespri label, and is not yet inflicted on the fruit’s surface; but in modifying the identity of the fruit and changing the terms of its representation the consumer contract between name, brand and object is unsettled.

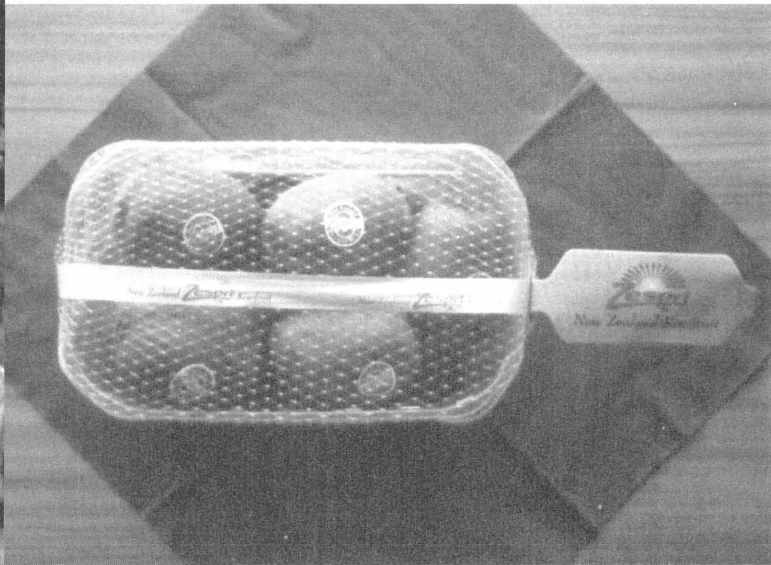


FIGURE 9

“One of our industry’s greatest assets is our brand.”

New Zealand Kiwifruit Marketing Board, 1992.

(Reference number Eph-B-FRUIT-1992-01-15

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

FIGURE 10

A basket of Zespri, New Zealand 1998.



The Main



FIGURE 11
 "Strike gold! with the greatest cheese promotion ever." Anchor Farm Products Co-operative Limited, 1982.
 (Reference number Eph-C-CHEESE-1982-01
 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

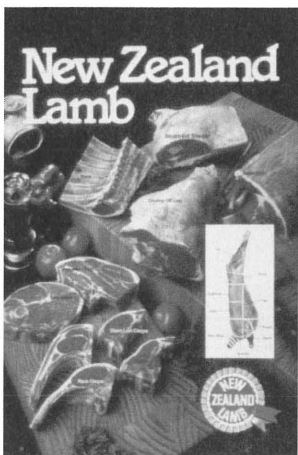


FIGURE 12
 New Zealand Lamb.
 New Zealand Meat Producers' Board, 1989
 (Reference number Eph-D-MEAT-1989-01
 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

It's time for the main course and my second question: what does it mean to place typography on an edible substrate? I could offer a smorgasbord to stimulate the visual taste buds. Pass the bread and butter and cheese and you'll see what I mean (SEE FIGURE 11). Or what about the roast lamb, beef and pork with its quality assurance stamp echoing the physical branding of the live animal (SEE FIGURE 12)? Of course, I was desperate to locate some alphabet soup, but to no avail. It seems to have fallen out of fashion down-under, or else the technology of production is lost. Perhaps we really aren't supposed to play with our food after all, although fridge magnet poetry seems to have generated a more sophisticated notion of food and knowledge today, even retailing in five different languages. I'd really prefer, however, to move back to 1840 and the most important transportable staple of the time: cabin bread. All 14,000 kilos of it (SEE FIGURE 13). I want to commence the main course by serving up a short history of biscuit manufactory and then pass around various condiments to spice it up: developments in packaging, changes in retailing, behavior-modifying strategies in the advertising industry and patterns of consumer buying and eating. A tall order, one could say.

REQUIRED ON ACCOUNT
 OF THE
FRENCH GOVERNMENT

Biscuit	- - - -	14,000 kilogrammes.
Flour	- - - -	3,000 ditto.
Coffee	- - - -	660 ditto.
Sugar	- - - -	280 ditto.
Salt Pork	- - - -	1,130 ditto.
Vinegar	- - - -	300 litres.
Mustard Grain	- - - -	50 kilogrammes.

The whole must be of the first quality. The Biscuit and Flour in barrels if possible.

Tenders for the above will be received under sealed cover on Monday morning o'clock, at Barrett's Hotel.

Samples of each article will be required to be sent with the Tenders.

Port Nicholson, December 26, 1840.

[PRINTED AT THE "GAZETTE" OFF

Course

The lowly biscuit is an underrated and undervalued commodity which underpinned the entire colonial immigration enterprise. It doesn't figure in our gastronomically inventive metaphoric language: there is no suitable equivalent for "taking the cake" and Marie Antoinette certainly did not exclaim "let them eat biscuits!" George Bernard Shaw may have coined "to take the biscuit" while touring New Zealand, 'John Bull's other island,' but the phrase never really took off. And yet, one pound of biscuit per day was rationed to each steerage passenger during the long three month trip from Britain to New Zealand; that's at least eighty-four pounds of biscuit for the duration of the trip, unless the ship met with rough seas or becalming weather (SEE FIGURE 14).¹⁷

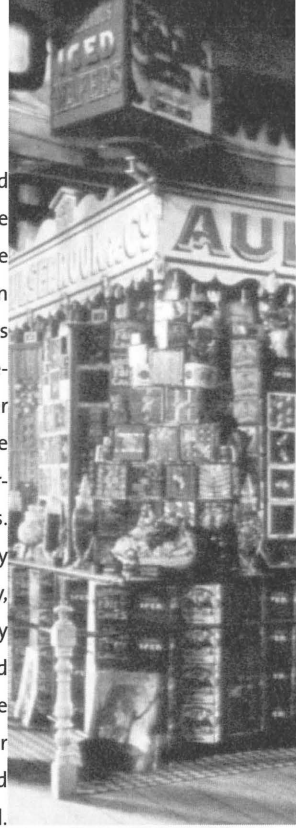


FIGURE 13
*Broadcast advertising items
required by the French Government,
1840. (Reference number F-48015-1/2,
Alexander Turnbull Library,
Wellington, New Zealand.)*

FIGURE 14
*Contemporary cabin bread,
New Zealand, 1998.*

Navy biscuits pre-dated the invention of tinned food as a way of sustaining military forces on the open seas and in land engagements. Before mechanization of the industry in Britain, a gang of five men could produce 100 lbs of biscuit in 36 minutes, including the 15 minutes required for baking. The 'driver' made the dough which was in turn kneaded by the 'breakman.' On the moulding board, individual slips of dough were hand-shaped and docked, that is, pierced full of holes by means of a docker, "a hoop of tin or brass, in which is set a frame of points, something like a harrow."¹⁸ The 'furner', 'mate' and the 'idleman' then pitched the formed biscuits into pre-heated ovens. In 1833, the demand for quantity, consistency and extended shelf life led to a mechanization of the process. From mechanical mixing and kneading, through rolling and rough cutting, the dough was friction-fed along a continuous web to the fine cutting and stamping plates where each 18" square of dough was cut into 42 hexagonal biscuits, docked and stamped at the same time with a broad arrow and the number of the oven. No extraneous labeling required here! (The relationship between biscuit manufacture and paper-making has yet to be written.) 10,000 biscuits an hour and 7,354 tons per year was the yield.¹⁹

Navy biscuits were initially packed into wooden barrels and shipped around the world. However, salt water creeping into the barrels and spoiling the biscuits often meant the difference between life or starvation on the high seas. The next innovation came not in manufacturing, but packaging. Tin-plate containers had a long history dating back to the Roman times. In the nineteenth century, the tin containers from which the local grocer selected, weighed out and packed in paper bags various loose foodstuffs migrated to the home with highly decorated food storage containers and sealable shakers for spices and condiments. The popularity of biscuit tins for shop and home is witnessed by the fraternal collaboration between the tin box makers Huntley, Boorne, & Stevens and the Reading bakers Huntley & Palmer. By 1883, ten million plain tins came off the assembly line to be filled with these justly famous crackers and biscuits. The exterior surface of the tin box became the perfect medium for advertising. Prior to 1876, labelling was possible either with a printed paper band glued around the box, or hand-painted with enamel then baked. Huntley, Boorne, & Stevens pioneered transfer printing directly onto the tin and helped redefine the history of the color printing process. The result was an increasingly florid use of available space as tins became three-dimensional canvases for exuberant visual display (SEE FIGURE 15).



Biscuits would have remained in the barrel or the tin if it were not for an aggressive advertising campaign coupled with an innovation in packaging design at the turn of the twentieth century. The makers of Uneeda Biscuits, Nabisco, patented the “In-Er-Seal” sealed paper wrapper in a folding box. This device promised freshness and portability, and guaranteed clinical-style hygiene. It also signaled the demise of bulk retailing in the face of personless self-help shopping. Yet, the advertising campaign was very clever: “it did not seek to sunder shoppers’ relationships with people they trusted, their grocers, but it sought to introduce them to something they would be able to trust even more, packaged, branded, advertised products.”²⁰ The Uneeda, yes you



do need it, biscuit phenomenon brought with it a whole battery of different retail and consumer assumptions and galvanized a rethinking of the role of branding in relation to foodstuffs.

The stage was set for a completely new packaging material and quality assurance standard. In 1911, a revolutionary process and product was invented: Cellophane. It was first manufactured in France in 1913 and licensed by Du Pont Chemicals in the USA in 1923. Moisture-proof cellulose film, a chemical cousin to rayon, replaced wood, tin and paper as the packaging dream material, and in so doing, changed the face of packaging in the twentieth century. Cellophane not only promised and delivered freshness, portability and hygiene, but brought the mystique and illusion of barrier-free shopping. Transparent film enabled the consumer to see exactly what he or she was buying. Advertising designers spared no effort in dressing up or dressing down the product according to its latent sex appeal. But wait a minute – biscuits, sexy?

Cellophane developers recognized that while cellophane's transparency was appealing, it was its ability to reflect light which transformed non-descript, vapid foodstuffs into sexy objects of desire. "Glistening cellophane contributed strongly to the perception that the goods inside were fresher, cleaner, safer than those packed loose, or even than goods packed in conventional opaque containers."²¹ Cellophane's sparkle whetted shopper's appetites and ushered in a whole era of impulse buying. Shop fittings were altered to increase space and light, thus enhancing the packaging aura. The advertising 'package pyramid' was developed as an impressive and imposing display of consumer intimidation (SEE FIGURE 16). After WWII, petroleum-based plastic films used in packaging extended the selection of consumer cravings. The package material itself substitutes for the spray oils, paints and water spritzers used by food stylists for photographs in top culinary magazines in order to fashion mouth-watering sensory impressions. Shoppers really do put their money where their mouths are.



FIGURE 16
Boxes and containers of biscuits, chocolates and cakes to advertise the Aulsebrook biscuit factory, 1911. ("Steffano Webb Collection," photographer Steffano Webb, reference number G-9094-1/1 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

FIGURE 15
An industrial stand at an exhibition, possibly the Christchurch Exhibition of 1906–1907, advertising Aulsebrook and Company, biscuit manufacturers ("Steffano Webb Collection," photographer Steffano Webb, reference number G-5016-1/1 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

When you put yourself behind a shopping cart, the world changes. . . . During the thirty minutes you spend on an average trip to the supermarket, about thirty thousand different products vie to win your attention and ultimately to make you believe in their promise. When the door opens, automatically, before you, you enter an arena where your emotions and your appetites are in play, and a walk down the aisle is an exercise in self-definition. . . . With its thousands of images and messages, the supermarket is as visually dense, if not as beautiful, as a Gothic cathedral. It is as complex and as predatory as a tropical rain forest. It is more than a person can possibly take in during an ordinary half-hour shopping trip. No wonder a significant percentage of people who need to wear eyeglasses don't wear them when they're shopping, and some researchers have spoken of the trancelike state that pushing a cart through this environment induces. The paradox here is that the visual intensity that overwhelms shoppers is precisely the thing that makes the design of packages so crucial. Just because you're not looking at a package doesn't mean you don't see it. Most of the time, you see far more than a container and a label. You see a personality, an attitude toward life, perhaps even a set of beliefs.²²

If fifty-six percent of all buying episodes fall into the category of "simple locating behavior,"²³ that is, looking for the familiar package, the known visual identity, then the other forty-four percent is spent in navigating between the sirenic rocks of reading and impulse buying. If packaging alone can whet the appetite, what about the product itself? Uneda could run an entire advertising campaign without once referring to the taste, smell, look, sound or feel of its crackers. In the sterile, detached, depersonalized world of the supermarket, these sensory cues are perforce obliterated. "Universal packaging and the self-service store have removed most of the old-fashioned sensory experiences from food shopping. . . . Because the evidence no longer exists, some things can no longer be proved. One can only say that in pre-war days eggs had thicker shells and bread tasted better, and hope to be believed."²⁴ I'll return to the downside of food archaeology in a moment.

Let's chew on these biscuits a little longer.

Unless Nabisco was advocating consumer betrayal, its product ultimately had to fulfill the promise of its marketing strategy. One way to accomplish this was to extend and transfer the brand endorsement to the product itself. In the case of the biscuit, it was possible for the edible foodstuff both to carry the marks of manufacture and to function as a vehicle for advertising. Uneeda, as with virtually all modern crackers, water biscuits and cabin bread repeats the historical branding of the docker. This mark of identification is also a mark of authentication and legitimation, irrespective of brand. Carr's of England, of table water biscuit fame, was one of the first manufacturers to combine the docking with baking its company logo right onto the biscuit.²⁵ In the homemaker's kitchen a comparable fingerprinting process occurs, flattening soft dough with a fork or pricking firm dough with its tines produces the mark of the hand. Similarly, cutters and stamps on hand-rolled doughs such as shortbread and gingerbread still create an identifiably hand-made product. Soft drop-style dough creates the rough and ready trademark of today's home-made, hand-made, home-style biscuits. "Home-style" is the buzz word of contemporary commercial bakers and advertisers as they re-invent the modern housewife, load her with the symbology of nostalgia and endeavor to reclaim a market niche in a world whose food-eating habits have changed dramatically since the erosion of the ritual of morning and afternoon tea. However, "home-style" biscuits can convey only one message. And as rich as that message may be, it does not permit distinction between brands.



FIGURE 17
 Examples of brass biscuit stamps,
 Aulsebrook's brand,
 Christchurch, New Zealand
 (private collection).

One advantage of mechanized biscuit manufactory over domestic home baking is the level of detail which can be translated onto an edible substrate of flour, sugar and water. European-style biscuit doughs, particularly the plain, sweet “Nice” variety brought to New Zealand by early biscuit entrepreneurs, clearly took the impression of brass stamps with their various relief and intaglio lettering styles (SEE FIGURE 17). Commercial manufacturing techniques, then and now, can guarantee uniformity and enable printing on dough to an increasingly intricate degree. The ability to retain absolute legibility ensures product definition through brand name, product name and decorative elements unique to the product line. Unless the machine or operator breaks down, each biscuit is like its neighbor, uniform in shape, size and message (taste too, we hope), ready to be packaged and sold to the consumer, who in turns endorses the product by eating it and its message bite by bite.

What is the advantage of imprinting over any other manufacturing technique? I can think of at least four reasons: the mark of manufacture is a seal of quality and authenticity, guaranteeing goods which are untampered and unforged; if and when the biscuit is separated from its package, it is still identifiable; the psychological advantage of a uniform, known quantity is important to the consumer/customer and satisfies his expectations, either in the mad dash through the supermarket or in the unthinking reach for a munchie; the object is its own promotional tool, whether sitting on a tray with other biscuits, or placed in the mouth (type side up? letters towards you or your audience?); and finally the food archaeologist's task is made a whole lot easier. As for the latter, one could say, quite rightly, that food truly belongs in the category of ephemera. It is bought, eaten and apart from a few crumbs, disappears into the digestive tract to be transformed into something rich and strange, the intellectual capital of energy. Like the ubiquitous poster or billboard, food grabs your attention, communicates a nugget of information and then is rendered superfluous, pasted over with another meal, denied an

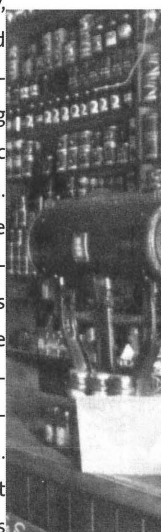


FIGURE 18
 Interior view of a grocer's shop, prior
 in the Wanganui region, circa 1890
 (“Tesla Studios Collection,”
 photographer Frank J Denton,
 reference number F-16594-1/1
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

after-life. Certainly its packaging and advertising is catalogued in ephemera collections the world over. How often, however, is the foodstuff saved with its package? If a visual record (forget about the other senses) is not preserved, what is left? Can you research packaging divorced from its contents? Imprinted biscuits furnish a particularly salient example of the archival record. They are an amazingly rich form of informational record, yet how often are they kept, let alone catalogued and accessed? In an unusual instance of fortuitous preservation, the remains of a Huntley and Palmer's biscuit, still in its original greaseproof wrapper, specially designed for and taken on Scott's ill-fated 1912 Antarctic expedition and found beside his body, was auctioned in late 1999 by Christie's in London and bought by a mystery bidder for £3,910. While mouldering biscuits are probably not to every librarian's or archivist's taste, they are a fascinating window on an historical moment. Let's taste a few New Zealand examples.



Commercial biscuit making, primarily of the cabin bread variety, started in the colony as early as 1843 with Bycrofts of Nelson and Auckland. Hudson of Dunedin began production in 1854, Aulsebrooks of Christchurch in 1863, with Griffins of Nelson following in 1880. Plain and cream crackers were next on the domestic manufacturing menu, followed by sweet and fancy biscuits. Before 1950, biscuits were shipped from the factory direct to the grocer in 25 lb tins. Like canned food, biscuits were one commodity which could unite geographically isolated New Zealanders together in communal eating habits.²⁶ Not restricted by the government's transportation regulations which, until 1975, required virtually all transport over 150km distance to be accomplished by rail, biscuits were as portable as their naval ancestors. The grocer stacked the colorful tins along the floor, against the counter, on his shelves and sold biscuits loose to customers in brown paper bags, "the ubiquitous pre-1950 package;"²⁷ he also did a roaring business in the broken biscuit trade (SEE FIGURE 18). Companies advertised their familiar tins in the various industrial exhibitions and trams provided a new form



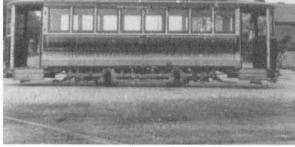


FIGURE 19
 Tram in the Christchurch area,
 circa 1880–1920. (“Steffano Webb
 Collection,” photographer Steffano Webb,
 reference number G-19548-1/1
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

Please use our Slogan:

**“MENNIE’S
 for ME”**

when ordering

BISCUITS

Procurable at Auckland Warehouse and all Branches
 of The Farmers’ Union Trading Co. Ltd.

To our many friends throughout the Country we
 extend Hearty Good Wishes with this
 New Catalogue.

J. M. MENNIE Ltd.
 Manufacturers - Auckland

44 ADVERTISEMENTS

**E. WATERS,
 WHOLESALE AND RETAIL CONFECTIONER,
 82, QUEEN STREET, AUCKLAND.**

Luscious, Spiced Buns for Ladies, Tea, Coffee, and Refreshments

RESULTS OF EVERY DESCRIPTION ALWAYS ON HAND.
 All kinds of Confectionery, Sponges, and Wedding Cakes made
 at the shortest notice.

CONFECTIONERY.
E WATERS CONFECTIONER.
 Manufacture and all its Bakery Goods from the WHOLESALE
 TRADE.
 Scotch Mince, Biscuits, Puff-pastry, and Confectionery
 Lozenges, with Hot Mince.

BOILED GOODS OF EVERY DESCRIPTION.
 All Goods are guaranteed equal and better than the imported, and we
 sell at lower prices.

WATERS’ SOLUBLE CHOCOLATE:
A Beverage for the Healthy, the Family, and the Convalescent.

This preparation owes its characteristic properties and fine aroma to the use of
 the finest Swiss and Belgian Cocoa Beans, and of being carefully pre-
 pared from every day according to precise methods. It is not only palatable,
 but strengthening and healthily nourishing. (See advertisement on adjacent 43
 and opposite page.) This Chocolate is especially recommended in the important
 article. In fact it possesses every requisite quality to ensure a permanent and
 extensive popularity. Sold at E. Waters Confectionery, Queen Street, Auckland,
 N.Z., and all other places.

“Having used Mr. Waters’ Chocolate I find it to be very palatable, and
 believe it to be strengthening and useful. Especially being one that has not other
 ingredients in it. It is a very good article.”—(Signed) Violet E.
 Robertson, M.B.E.S., N.Z., 81.”

“Auckland, 20th June, 1914.”

“See ‘The Chocolate, of which you eat so much, makes a very
 pleasant and strengthening beverage from our exclusive selection,
 and the same is obtained, made in that of any French or English Chocolate—
 Violet E., 8, Fitzroy Street, N.Z.”

“Auckland, 20th June, 1914.”

FIGURE 20
 “Mennie’s for me” J.M. Mennie Ltd.,
 Auckland, 1925 (Reference number
 Eph-B-RETAIL-FTC-1925-044
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

FIGURE 21
 Advertisement for E. Waters, Wholesale
 and Retail Confectioner Auckland, 1925
 (Reference number F-124046-1/2
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

of ambulatory advertizing (SEE FIGURE 19). Despite such market penetration, food advertizing was generally uncommon before 1950 in print media such as newspapers, magazines and books with the exception of some proprietary items like Highlander Condensed Milk, Bournville Cocoa, Kirkpatrick’s Jams and Aulsebrook’s and Griffin’s biscuits. However, when the Auckland-based Mennie’s biscuit company put an ad in the 1925 Farmers mail-order catalogue, they put their money where their customers’ mouth was. Using a uniquely designed display face which imitates the process of rolling out dough, Mennie’s reinforced the relationship between type and food by impressing its brand name on the biscuit (SEE FIGURE 20). More common were ads for various food tradesmen, such as this master of desserts whose corporate identity is composed by means of a range of typographic confections available in the printer’s ornamental display case (SEE FIGURE 21).

Today, Griffin’s probably has one of the widest typographic selections for your afternoon tea (SEE FIGURE 22). Original Round Wine, Original Vanilla Wine and Original Super Wine each redefine the round picture plane with the unique identifiers of name, location of manufacture and type of biscuit. The simple intaglio, no-nonsense sans serif capitals of Round Wine are modified in Vanilla Wine with crisp, nineteenth century ornamented serified capitals promoting value-added taste. Super Wine defies its humble origins by foregoing the docking pricks entirely and supplements the round quality guarantee stamp found on the package with high relief heraldic letters and ornament. This more complex stamping process may be in danger of less definition according to the quality of the dough and its packaging, but market research has revealed that Super Wines outsell all the other players in Griffin’s wine biscuit line-up. “Super” suggests performance enhancement and empowerment at the same time as a radically different treatment of the surface decoration singles it out from its mates.

The use of typography to encourage playful consumer interaction with the product is repeated to greater or lesser degrees with other Griffin's biscuits. "Smooth, gentle" Milk Arrowroots "baked with the goodness of milk & honey" convey their message in unassuming condensed sans serif caps. Original Malt Biscuits offer a slight flair with addition of an italic brand name, while Krispie, toasted coconut flavored biscuits made with real coconut, are self-evident in their genre, boasting an italic script face, to give it a tropical pizzazz (SEE FIGURE 23). Iced biscuits are in a league of their own. These fancy biscuits contributed to a greater acceptance of bought biscuits and contributed to the dramatic rise in consumption from 4 to 6 kg per annum per person between 1900 and 1940 to nearly 10kg per person per annum in 1990.²⁸ Cameo Creams don't need any elegant words to offset their folk art, floral arabesques. I include it simply as an example of the detail biscuit makers are capable of producing in the name of food science (SEE FIGURE 24). Swiss Creams use a semi-calligraphic fluid outline face to evoke a charming mountain view seen from the comfort of the lowlands: a different mood completely from Griffin's Dark Chocolate Wheaten Biscuits with their heavy stamp on rough-cast dough with drawn swirls of chocolate on the bottom – or is it the top (SEE FIGURE 25)? Finally, "proudly exported to countries around the world" are pictographic animal crackers and Choc Tiny Toys (SEE FIGURE 26). The Griffin brand name is now on the delivery truck, advertising the product at the same time as its method of conveyance. Yet, these carriers of brand equity are unmatched by the novelty series "Funtime Rhymes" with its nursery rhyme images and first lines baked in in solid relief (SEE FIGURE 27 & 28). At what point does language migrate from oral culture, to paper, to the oral fetish of the biscuit? What role do these biscuits serve: didacticism; reading reinforcement; a tasty reward for the consumption of knowledge? We circle back to food and knowledge. And yes, in the absence of honey, "Funtime Rhymes" do have icing you can lick off – should naturally-colored tongue pink be to your taste.



FIGURE 22
Griffin's Wine series biscuits,
New Zealand, 1998.

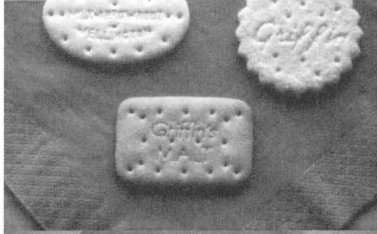


FIGURE 23
 Griffin's Arrowroots,
 Malt and Krispies biscuits
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 24
 Griffin's Cameo Cream biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.

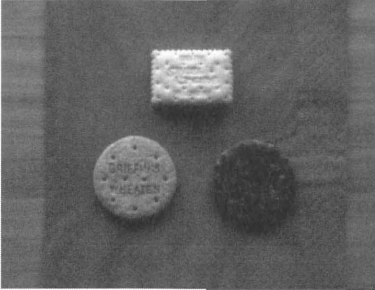


FIGURE 25
 Griffin's Swiss Creams
 and Wheaten biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 26
 Griffin's Tiny Toys biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.

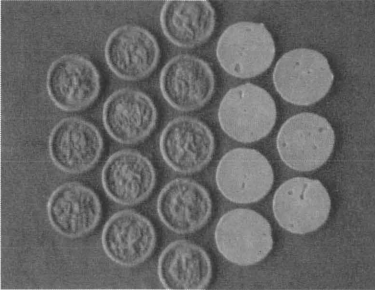


FIGURE 27
 Griffin's Funtime Rhyme biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 28
 "Boys and girls go out to play,"
 Griffin's Funtime Rhyme biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



A Sorbet-ic Interlude

Typography on the edible substrate of the humble biscuit has cleverly solved the problem of product identification when separated from its container or packaging. Instead of the “DRINK ME” form of labeling, biscuit manufacturers offer the identity of “Eat me.” But what about our third semiotic model? As you will recall, Alice was confronted with a hookah-smoking caterpillar and an oversized mushroom. Without the aid of imprinted language but with the aid of words made flesh, the object itself became the communication medium capable of transformative powers when consumed. In the realm of New Zealand biscuit manufactory, the Christchurch-based firm, Maynell Foods Limited, holds the Guinness Book of Records title for the world’s largest biscuit. On 2 April 1996, their flagship product, the “Cookie Time” chocolate chip cookie, was reincarnated with thirteen tons of ingredients (including over a million chocolate chips), spread 2.5cm thick over a total diameter of 24.9 meters or 75 feet. After five hours of baking in a specially designed oven, the first piece exhibiting the characteristically rough trademark of mom’s home-baking was fed to their walking logo, the Cookie Muncher (SEE FIGURE 29). This furry, rotund, red monster with bulging eyes sports a rainbow-colored circular saw blade for a navel/stomach that looks suspiciously like Macintosh Computers’ apple logo without the bite/byte out of it. In eating the product, we too become cookie munchers/monsters, identifying with this comic caricature of sweetness and unbridled alimentary lust.



FIGURE 29
Cookie Time Monster

But the oversized product, once eaten, is no more and without typographic identifiers on a hard biscuit substrate, how do we know we are eating this particular brand as opposed to a generic instance of home-baking? The manufacturer has searched for more permanent advertising solutions, ones which can take advantage of the aesthetic power of signage to create whole symbolic worlds which have nothing to do with simple biological necessity and everything to do with product identification and corporate advertising; like the world record enterprise, these solutions come from the domain of “Big Things.” The Cookie Time bakery building, for instance, is now identified with its own product, painted with innumerable chocolate chip cookies (SEE FIGURE 30). The Griffins Wellington manufacturing plant proudly proclaims its wares in technicolor abstractions. Today, large-scale food signage has captured the consumer’s edible marketplace, replacing satisfying foodstuffs with the visual paradoxes and puns of virtual reality.



FIGURE 30
*Cookie Time manufacturing plant,
Christchurch, New Zealand 1999.*

Dessert

Large-scale food signage occupies a significant place in the landscape of New Zealand popular culture. As advertising billboard, it charms, distracts and sells; as roadside marker, it enables simple or complex locating behavior; as outdoor sculptural installation, it functions as tourist commodity, identifying place with the sustainable objects of primary production. Radically oversized, non-edible representations of edible foodstuffs create a virtual landscape of timeless, unsatisfied desire. The actual foodstuff is replaced by its image or simulacrum, converting simple biological necessity into a complex system of representation.

Before the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 which homogenized and pasteurized the exuberant idiosyncracies of American advertisers, “the roadside [was] a visually vibrant shopping spree. . . the highway habitat grew quickly into a delirious realm that offered consumption as a potent form of entertainment. . . Experiencing roadside food signs is a visual treat. Tempting buildings encrusted with neon-encrusted confections are every bit as esthetically delicious as the food is gratifying.”²⁹ Fortunately, New Zealand is still a country of large open spaces, few concentrated settlements and a small population base; we have had, as yet, no need of such legislation to combat the excrescences of visual clutter. Yet, it does not mean we suffer a paucity of consumable culture. “Big Things” are one of the most popular and visually riveting forms of highway signage. Take, for example, the lowly *Actinida chinensis*. A tourist passing through the North Island town of Te Puke (that’s pronounced ‘te pookie’) is confronted by a massive four-story replica of a kiwifruit which marks the heart of the horticultural industry (SEE FIGURE 31). Contrary to standard kiwifruit/Zespri advertising practice, this one is significantly label-less, sliced in half and mounted on its side. When visiting Ohakune, the gateway to the North Island



FIGURE 31
Te Puke, “Town Icons,”
New Zealand Post philatelic series 1999.

ski fields, the eye is assaulted by a grossly oversized, free-standing carrot separated from a sign (if you hadn't guessed it already) proclaiming the town to be the carrot capital of New Zealand (SEE FIGURE 32). Both Rakaia and Gore in the South Island sport the ever-ubiquitous leaping trout, implying the plenitude of mountain rivers and streams (SEE FIGURE 33), while Kaikoura, whale-watching capital of New Zealand, lures hungry stomachs into "The Suntrap Restaurant" with a larger-than-life lobster poised almost menacingly over the entranceway (SEE FIGURE 34). Needless to say, there are many more simulacra populating the visual landscape.

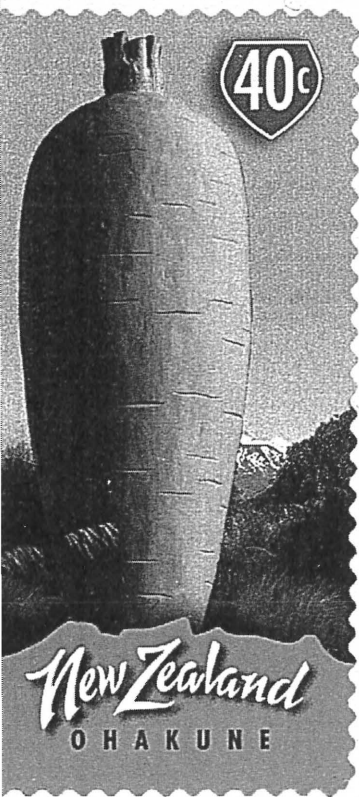


FIGURE 32
Ohakune, "Town Icons,"
New Zealand Post philatelic series 1999.

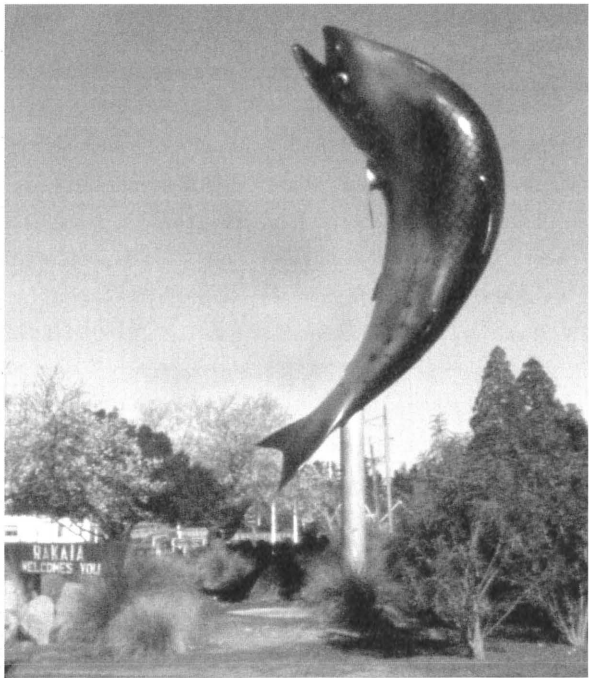


FIGURE 33
The big trout, Rakaia, New Zealand 1999.

In each instance, the identity of the town is commodified, associated simply, monstrously, yet effectively, with an object of alimentary significance. Unlike the supermarket, however, where life-size foodstuffs can be and often are redundantly labeled, these outdoor larger-than-life food sculptures of the roadside supermarket lack such typographic identifiers. As a result, a space between object and signifier opens up and they come to mean something else, different and more – something perhaps as ephemeral as the Caterpillar's smoke-rings. Bigger than reality, vying for recognition and the tourist dollar, these ridiculously disproportionate yet endearing sculptures encourage visitors to stop and partake of the local fare. By purchasing a piece of the town, whether large or small, if only in a photograph or postcard or stamp, tourists participate in celebrating and ensuring the survival of the unique corporate identity. Moreover, they become, at least for a little while, another cultural ambassador charged with disseminating their newly acquired knowledge as mediated



FIGURE 34
*The big lobster, The Suntrap Restaurant,
Kaikoura, New Zealand 1999.*

through these icons to the rest of the world. And yet, as David Yanciw remarks, "It is funny, even though communities erect these big things, they sometimes seem embarrassed by their presence. I am always surprised at some communities with 'Big Things' that do not include pictures of them in their own tourist brochures. The irony is that the pictures they do include make their communities look just like any other. What is sometimes unique about their community is their 'Big Thing.'"³⁰ Ohakune has taken its identity so seriously that it holds an annual carrot festival complete with parade and floats to celebrate the opening of the ski season. And recently, in an unprecedented instance of inter-community rivalry, a truckload of carrots was mysteriously dumped in the public toilets of Taihape, gumboot capital of the world, purportedly by a disgruntled vegetarian. Police are awaiting a retaliatory gumboot assault.

James Fraser speculates that our society may be quickly approaching a state of wordlessness. Examining billboards as his prime candidate – though Big Things could equally pertain – he points to the increasing silencing of visual typographic language, where product representation and brand repetition are alone sufficient to generate the associative processes required by modern advertising strategists. "Are we moving too quickly to read? Or are these boards examples of the ultimate billboard where there is only an object and a trade name? Are these boards actually contributing to the lessening of tension by giving us a brief reprieve from the lyrics on our radios? Is their verbal silence heightening the strength of the image by acting as a counterpoint to the daily babble and wordiness of the other media, our neighbors, and our associates?"³¹ As if in confirmation of this, large-scale outdoor sculptural installations mirroring, miming and refashioning the objects of everyday life have spawned a whole cult of virtual galleries which document another manifestation of internet community along the touristic information highway. The Australian 'Big Things' movement is alive and well and living at the University of Newcastle <http://www2.eis.net.au/~acarr/bigthings/index.html>. In North

America, David Yanciw's 150 strong examples of "Big Things. The Monuments of Canada" <http://members.xoom.com/yanciw/> and Martin Ince's over 300 examples of "World's Largest Roadside Attractions" <http://www.infomagic.com/~martince/index.htm/> reinvent the scale of actual representations, lift them out of their spatial and temporal contexts and repackage them as exotic specimens in the pop cult landscape. Disconnected from their originating referent, these virtual representations have a symbolology all their own. Cultural codes based on aesthetic, marketing and advertising principles are consumed while reading and digesting the message; and those principles are defined by the aesthetics of a desire which remains unfulfilled and unsatisfied.³² Mary Douglas's observations on both the subordination of food's nourishing function to the decorative aspect and the relationship of object to viewer/interpreter are apposite: "food has come away from its context of the shared meal and stands in the context of the art gallery, as stuff to be set beside notable sculpture and painting. Separated from its normal context and away from the dietitian's concern with ingestion, nourishment and excretion, it conveys a sense of surprise, even a hint of obscenity. If sex were the subject matter of the exhibition, the effect would be the same."³³



and Coffee Liquers

In 1999, biscuits again took center-stage when Griffins decided to mark the turning of the century in their own unique way. The Millennium Biscuit Search was a national competition open to anyone to design the ultimate “New Zealand” biscuit. Out of 25,000 entries, three finalists were selected and nationwide voting commenced via a telephone hotline. A chocolate-covered Anzac biscuit won hands-down over the more predictable Kiwifruit-flavored mallowpuff (the biscuit equivalent of the Pavlova meringue dessert), and a suite of Kiwiana icons which included a fernleaf, a gumboot, and a rugby ball. The winning biscuit was baked at midnight on December 1999, and the designer’s name now features on all packaging. At first glance, the Anzac biscuit, a plain, unlettered, soft oatmeal cookie, seemed an unlikely candidate. Yet, for New Zealanders, it obviously not only embraced the defining moment of the country’s identity, when the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps faced the enemy at Gallipoli almost a century before, but embodied that identity in an icon of a favorite ritual. “Such was the veneration of Gallipoli that commercial exploitation of the world’s first acronym was forbidden by law. However, officialdom was powerless to prevent one national institution that honours the events of 1915: the wholesome Anzac biscuit.”³⁴ In an example of delicious irony, edible typography baked on a substrate is supplanted by a free-floating textual acronym, whose significance in the bitter theater of war is now effaced by the sweet chocolate coating of consumer desire.

The seventeenth century scholar, scientist and master of the essay form, Sir Francis Bacon, once talked about the art of studying in an alimentary way: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."³⁵ Later on, Sir William Congreve wrote a dramatic exchange about the hazards of books, reading and a paper diet, and in his epitaph, the printer Benjamin Franklin cast a glance at his fate at the jaws of worms. Food and knowledge exist in a dynamic relationship. Our language is riddled with their metaphors, our culinary landscape marked with their typologies, our culture populated by their images. From life-size foodstuffs to large-scale installations, the rage to identify and label has been equally and oppositely written over by the shifting sands of cultural representation. If the medium is the message, then the millennium provides ample food for thought –

you are what you eat.

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