

Friends

Culture & Cuisine



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Amy Bentley
Associate Professor
Nutrition, Food Studies
and Public Health
New York University

Friday, March 9, 2012
6:00 p.m., Dilworth Room

Reservations requested
Please email friends@ias.edu
or call 609.734.8008

A wine and cheese reception will precede the talk at 5:30 p.m.

Baby Food and the Industrialization of Taste

How did tiny jars of mashed bananas and pureed peas become such a familiar rite of passage for American infants and their parents? Why in just decades of baby foods' development did infants consume an average 72 dozen jars, beginning sometimes days after birth? The consumption of food is an extraordinarily social activity laden with complex and shifting layers of meaning. Not only what we eat, but how and why we eat, tell us much about society, history, cultural change, and humans' views of themselves. What, when, and how we choose to feed infants and toddlers—the notion of "baby food" as opposed to "adult food," and whether these foods are nourishing and satisfying—reveals how mass production, advertising, and beliefs about nutrition have shaped our thinking about infancy and corresponding parenting philosophies and practices, and ultimately our consumption preferences and habits.

This talk explores the story of commercial baby food in the twentieth century: the mid-century "golden age," the 1970s-80s reassessment as consumer activists exposed its inadequacies, and the late-twentieth century corporate attempts to address them. The story reveals the complexities of such a ubiquitous American product. While Americans welcomed mass produced baby food as a convenient, affordable way to provide infants a steady supply of fruits and vegetables, baby food also contributed to the decline of breast feeding in the twentieth-century. Such early consumption of commercial baby food also primed Americans' palates for the highly processed industrialized products that have contributed to our health problems today.

Amy Bentley is a historian with interests in the social, historical, and cultural contexts of food. She is the author of Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity (1998) and editor of A Culture History of Food in the Modern Era (2011). Her book on the cultural history of baby food will be published by University of California Press. Bentley is also a co-founder of the Experimental Cuisine Collective, an interdisciplinary group of scientists, food studies folks, and chefs who study the intersection of science and food.