**The Story of Food**

**Class activity for Chapter 4**

***Food, Farms and Community***

**Material Requirements: Internet access**

**Time Requirement: 30-40 minutes**

In activities from previous chapters, students were invited to trace the ingredients of food back through their production supply chains. This exercise is somewhat similar, though it focuses more on a food’s narrative story than its supply chain. This exercise can be used as a stepping off point for a broader discussion about food values and food marketing, and to inspire students to be more discerning in their use of media to assist them in deciding between alternative food purchases. It can also bring to light how deliberate food companies are in their marketing decisions, even when the products and their marketing campaigns might initially seem innocuous.

For this exercise, break students into groups of four to five and have each group choose a big-label food product and use the internet to research that product’s backstory. This will include telling the story of the company that manufactures the product, as well as telling the story of what prompted that company to develop and commercialize the product. Some products may have surprising stories behind them, including food safety violations, ingredients that might be controversial or that were even banned, or peculiar stories that revolve around marketing strategies. The narratives students develop for their chosen product won’t be complete, what’s important is that they take on the role of a sleuth and invest time learning things they might not otherwise have uncovered, or perhaps learn things the company would rather resign to the dustbin of history.

As students study their chosen product’s backstory, invite them in particular to pay attention to the values the company attempted to appeal to in order to market the product. Did the company appeal to customers’ desire for convenience to sell their product, or taste, or texture? Did they load their product with sugar, or design low-fat options to cater to those who believe that consumption of dietary fat contributes to obesity? Did they use labeling to advance claims that the product was “natural” or more pure than other products, or was “free” of some harmful ingredient normally used in such products? Did the company appeal to broader social values that might not initially be associated with food, such as gender, racial or ethnic stereotypes, misogynous language or ideals, or the objectification of women (or men)? Is the product somehow distinguished by its origin, whether as an exotic import or a product of someplace regarded as special? How did the company use graphic design to market their product?

Has the product or its packaging or marketing changed over time, and how do these changes reflect changing consumer values?