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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## **Armed with a grocery cart, and a critical eye**

**With all the choices, what's a shopper to do? A food activist offers advice, aisle by aisle.**

By Hilary E. MacGregor

Times Staff Writer

May 29, 2006

Marion Nestle swings through the turnstile of a Vons supermarket near downtown, her observational antennae already on high alert.

"Oh, my God!" exclaims the nutrition researcher, food activist and self-styled supermarket anthropologist, abandoning her cart and practically running down the front of the store. She pulls down cans to read labels, and stares up at the mountains of sweet drinks that cascade from the end of the aisles like postmodern sculptures.

The petite New Yorker pauses to do some rapid calculations, then pulls a tiny digital camera from her blazer pocket and snaps a shot.

"The real estate devoted to this!" she exclaims. "This entire double aisle ... colas! Sprites! Candies!"

Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, loves food. In two earlier books — "Safe Food" and "Food Politics" — the outspoken professor took on topics such as industry influences on government food guidelines. Now she has written a practical book for consumers: "What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating."

Americans are confused about food, Nestle says, and in large part she blames the powerful food industry's brilliant marketing, federal agencies interested in supporting that industry, and supermarkets that have made a science of cluttering the path to healthful items you need (such as milk, always in the back of the store) with unhealthy items you don't (such as snacks, candy and sodas in the central aisles and at the front.)

She wrote her book, she says, to help people eat better — from a viewpoint of health but also of politics and ecology.

I needed to shop for my family of four, so I took Nestle along as advisor.

We hit a Vons, but it could have been Safeway, Ralphs, Gelson's or even Whole Foods because most stores adhere to the same basic layout and rules.

Cruising the aisles to the slow background music (designed to make you linger), Nestle

points out that supermarkets carry about 40,000 products, and most of the center aisles are stocked with ones you don't need.

Her first tip: Stick to the periphery of the store. That is where you will find the necessities to eat well.

We begin on the outer edge, in the produce section. Nestle suggests that local produce be first choice — because the longer it takes to move a food to where you buy it, the less "fresh" it is. Country of origin isn't always easy to ascertain, she says, because produce companies aren't required to state this. (She says pressure from the food industry led Congress to postpone until 2008 a law making such information mandatory.)

Second choice would be certified organic — not for nutritional reasons (so far, scientific evidence for nutritional differences are negligible) but because organic farmers use fewer pesticides and keep the water cleaner and the soil richer. She points out the tiny "9" in front of a product's price look-up number (or PLU, used by clerks to identify produce) that identifies a food as certified organic.

Our produce purchases done, we move on to the dairy section.

"Oh, dear, it's gotten so difficult," Nestle says, looking at the wall of colorful milk cartons of 1%, 2%, whole, skim, organic, half gallons, quarts, cream, nondairy creamers, soy milk and Lactaid. She recommends 1% or skim to get the benefits of milk without the high saturated fats.

Again, she recommends organic: Safeway, which owns Vons, has launched its own organic line and there it is, reasonably priced. "If you don't want your kids to have milk with pesticides in the feed, or hormones from genetically modified cows, or all the other stuff that gets put in there that is bad, or not bad, you buy it," she says.

I buy it, but I pay about \$1 more for a quart. That difference could quickly add up in a house with two small milk drinkers.

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### **Watch the sugar**

Over to the yogurt — a handy snack that, as she says, has "an aura of health." Maybe so, Nestle says, if it is plain, low-fat or nonfat and with no added sugar. That type is pretty hard to find among the 40 or so brands.

"The amount of sugar in these things is staggering," she says. "I call these desserts."

I reach for the organic YoBaby Stonyfield Farm yogurt that my baby loves. Nestle scans the label: half an ounce of sugar in a 4-ounce container. "Sugar is providing half the calories," she says. "If you just add one teaspoon of sugar into a plain yogurt, that will be two-thirds less sugar.... I'd buy the plain."

Next up: The seafood counter, probably the most nerve-racking part of the store for a health-conscious shopper. The messages about fish are so conflicting that it is hard to tell whether one is doing the family a favor by feeding them fish or poisoning them.

Nestle spends more than 50 pages on fish in her book, discussing methylmercury in fish, fish farming, labeling, safety and sustainability. Her basic rules, though, boil down to these: Find a fishmonger you trust, try to buy wild, not farm-raised, fish and carry a fish information card to help make your selection, given the blizzard of species and health and environmental considerations. (The Seafood Choices Alliance, <http://www.seafoodchoices.com> has such a guide.)

We head to the bakery for some bread — and encounter, yet again, a huge selection. For whole grain bread, Nestle says, find loaves stating they're 100% whole wheat, listing whole wheat flour as the first ingredient, and with at least 2 grams of fiber per ounce. Many commercial bakers add back wheat bran or cracked wheat to make white bread look like whole wheat.

Pawing through the wrapped loaves, we notice that labels on every one of them lists high fructose corn syrup as about the third ingredient — extra, unneeded sugar. Others contain supposedly healthful additives, such as one we spot with omega-3 fatty acids.

"What happened to bread?" Nestle asked. "Why does it have to be something that does all these magical things for you?"

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### **Consumer choices**

Nutritionists largely agree with what Nestle says — but express reservations about the practicality.

Susan Bowerman, of the Center for Human Nutrition at UCLA, says that Nestle's recommendations are certainly thorough but "the reality is that consumers struggle with so many issues when it comes to food purchases.... So many choices will ultimately depend on individual priorities" such as taste, convenience, and, for many, cost.

For example, wild fish are expensive — and the benefits of eating fatty fish, farmed or wild, outweigh not eating it at all, says Andrea Giancoli, an L.A.-based spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Assn. The same, she says, goes for organic food.

We finally venture into the middle of the store for cereal. Nestle perks up.

She grabs a box of whole grain Peanut Butter Cookie Crisp cereal from General Mills. There on the box is a cartoon character and three manufacturer health proclamations — that it's a good source of calcium and whole grains with 12 vitamins and minerals.

Nestle flips to the nutrition label and counts off at least seven kinds of sugar. She laughs.

Then she spots Kellogg's Smart Start Antioxidants, which claims it can help support a healthy immune system. "This leaves me breathless," she says.

The most healthful choice, she says, is unsweetened cereal, and the place to look is the top shelves. Companies often pay to get their wares placed at eye level, and those that can afford that are usually large companies selling cereals with added sugar in attractive boxes.

I buy some old-fashioned shredded wheat.

Stumbling into the daylight, she joyfully swings a bag of souvenir cereals she has also purchased. She will take the best (and most outrageous) back to her office to add to her academic, cereal box collection.

"I am just staggered by how the marketers dream this stuff up," she says, "by how they get away with this. And why people fall for it."

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Tips for the trip to the grocery store

People who want to eat healthfully need to eat less, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and go easy on junk food. They should also remember that their diet over time — not day-to-day — is what matters. Marion Nestle's latest book offers many other tips for making choices in the grocery store, such as:

- Look at calories *and* serving sizes on food labels. Most companies keep serving sizes small, so calorie counts are deceptively low.
- On ingredient lists, sugar comes in many forms, such as high fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, fructose, honey and dextrose.
- The more pulp left in juice, the better, because nutrients stick to the fiber in the pulp.
- Don't go nuts on healthful oils: All oils, even healthful ones such as olive or canola, contain 120 calories a tablespoon.
- Don't overload on beef or you'll get too much fat. Most Americans are getting plenty of protein.
- If you want more healthful foods, look for packages with short ingredient lists.
- You don't need to pay a premium for brown eggs. Nutritionally, they are no different than white eggs.

- Get used to drinking water: It has no sugar or calories. Treat soda like a dessert.

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