

## Attention, Shoppers: Avoid the Center Aisles

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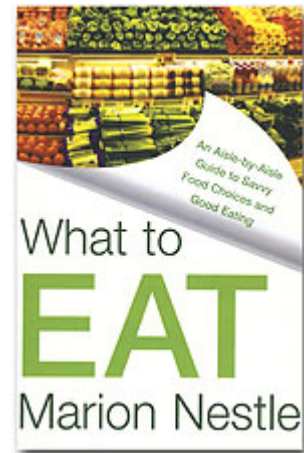
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By Wendy Edelstein, Public Affairs

*Nutritionist Marion Nestle's goal is to help consumers decide what to put in their grocery carts and on their plates*

Marion Nestle began to hear a common complaint four years ago while she was on the road promoting *Food Politics*, her then-current book, which showed how food lobbies undermined and ultimately shaped the federal diet guidelines issued in the early 1990s.

"People would tell me they felt like bursting into tears when they went into a supermarket," recalls Nestle (pronounced Nessel), the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University and currently a visiting professor at Berkeley. "They said they didn't know how to choose food or how to read labels," she says, and they felt anxious about all the health warnings on different food packages. They pleaded with Nestle to help, and she began to pay attention.



Nestle's latest book, *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*, due out in May from North Point Press, investigates and demystifies individual areas of the supermarket, drawing a clear link between the food industry's manipulative marketing messages and the public's bewilderment. To research why shopping for food causes consumers to stand dumbfounded and confused in the aisles, Nestle left Manhattan, where smaller grocery stores and bodegas predominate, and traveled upstate, where supermarkets abound. "There are too many choices in supermarkets," she explains, "with no information to help in making those choices. So I did the work."

Nestle started by reading labels, picking up packages, weighing items, and looking at prices — in essence, doing what any other consumer would do. Her research began in the homegrown area of the produce section in a Wegmans Food Market in Ithaca, where she located the first of seven different kinds of romaine lettuce in the store. "How are you supposed to know which one is the one to get?" asks Nestle rhetorically: the choices included organic, conventionally grown, pre-washed, and bagged selections in addition to the homegrown head of romaine produced within 50 miles of the store.

As her research progressed, she asked many questions: What do the signs mean? What do the labels mean? Where did the food come from and how long does it take to get here? Is it safe if it's in a bag? She tried to find the answer to any question that any consumer might possibly have.

The eve of *What to Eat's* publication finds Nestle at Berkeley, doing triple duty in the Goldman School of Public Policy, the School of Public Health, and the Graduate School of Journalism. In addition to teaching an undergraduate course, Food Politics and Policy, Nestle has been giving numerous talks to Bay Area audiences hungry to hear about food. Recently, she made time to sit down with the *Berkeleyan* for a conversation about nutrition, shopping, supermarkets, and the food industry.

**What kind of changes have you seen since *Food Politics* was published in 2002?**

I wrote that book to try to bring food marketing into public consciousness in the same way that anti-cigarette people had brought cigarette smoking into public consciousness, and that's now happened. Food marketing has had a free ride for a very long time. Well, that period is over. Food companies are screaming bloody murder but my feeling is they've been using our capitalist system to their advantage for a long time. This is how capitalism works. They can't have it both ways. They now have to face the possibility of restraints, especially on marketing to kids.

**What most surprised you in the research that you did for this new book?**

I was floored by how complicated the choices are, how much you have to know in order to be able to make a sensible choice, and how extensive is the range of issues that have to be taken into consideration. I greatly underestimated the complexity when people were asking me for help. Now I think that if you go to the supermarket and don't have problems with decisions, you don't understand the situation; things are really that complicated. The reason? Food marketers don't want you reading labels and giving a lot of thought to these products.

**They want to baffle the consumer?**

They want you to give up. They tell consumers that nutritionists don't know what they're talking about, that what you're supposed to eat changes all the time. They want the public to think: "It doesn't make any difference what I buy or eat."

**What general advice do you have on how to eat?**

My advice is just common sense: eat less, move more, eat fruits and vegetables, and don't eat too much junk food. No single decision about food makes that much difference. For most people, it's how much you eat that matters more than what you eat and what your overall diet looks like. I eat junk food. I eat candy. I eat desserts. But not all day long and not in huge quantities.

**Do people overthink what to eat?**

One of my main take-home lessons is that no one food makes that much difference. So much of the food business is about hype and trying to sell this or that food as providing special health benefits. Supermarkets are not social-service agencies. They are about selling real estate — places to market this or that food product.

**Where is the important real estate?**

Important for whom? The center aisles, ends of aisles, and cash registers are the prime selling areas. Stay away from them! Pay attention to the foods at the periphery of the store, where the meat, fish, dairy, and produce are located. If you want to eat healthfully, the trick is never to set foot in the center aisles — that's where the stores try to get consumers to buy the highly profitable junk foods that nobody really needs.

**What products have you found tend to confuse consumers?**

Eggs are one example. An egg is an egg. They're mostly distinguished by price and color, and there is no nutritional difference between brown ones and whites ones. So you pick your issues. If you care about how the hens are treated, you pick the cage-free kind. If you want omega-3 fats, you pick those, although fish are a better source. If you talk to people who work at grocery stores, they just think it's hilarious to add value to eggs. Eggs are eggs. Some are bigger, some smaller. The most important difference is size.



Marion Nestle (Wendy Edelstein photo)

**Was there a section of the supermarket that you found especially challenging?**

Dealing with issues about fish took five chapters. Should you eat it or not? What's the difference between farmed and wild? What are organic fish? What's with PCBs and methylmercury? This required a major research project, not only the kind of research I usually do, which is to read scientific papers, but also more reportorial kinds: talking to fishermen, fish sellers, and store clerks and asking lots of questions. As of mid-2005, fish sellers are required to label fish with country of origin and say whether the fish are farmed or wild. But as far as I can tell, these rules are widely ignored. Even in Berkeley, country-of-origin labeling seems haphazard, and you can't always tell whether fish is farmed or wild.

**In *What to Eat*, you write that Congress, the USDA, and the food industry are always looking for ways to weaken the standards for labeling foods as Certified Organic. Why would they do so?**

The USDA's job is to promote industrial American agriculture and to protect conventional agriculture from the idea that organics might be better. The Certified Organic label is an implicit criticism of conventional agriculture, and agribusiness is not eager to be implicitly criticized, so its lobbyists put tremendous pressure on Congress and the USDA to weaken the standards.

**In the book, you also address the unqualified health claims put out by the food industry. What are some examples of questionable health claims?**

I think all health claims on individual food products are questionable — every single one of them. If you eat oat-bran cereal, is that going to prevent heart disease? Of course not. Will a soy PowerBar help prevent cancer? I doubt it. So health claims make no sense. They're all taken out of context.

**Are health claims always conditional?**

They're always conditional and full of words like might, maybe, may. I don't think health claims should ever be allowed on food packages. Foods are foods; they aren't drugs.

**How does the food industry get the American Heart Association (AHA) or the American Diabetes Association to agree to allow their logos or endorsements on junk foods?**

Companies pay for these endorsements or implied endorsements. It's a simple cash exchange. The AHA, for instance, has criteria for the products they'll endorse: They only endorse products low in saturated fat and cholesterol — they don't care about sugar or carbohydrates at all. That's why you see the AHA logo on sugary cereals and salty snacks. The AHA doesn't even charge companies that much — just \$4,500 a product, as far as I can tell.

**Does the American Diabetes Association follow the same practice?**

Their policy is more complicated. Food companies donate very large amounts of money to the American Diabetes Association — you can go on their website and see how much money they're getting. They don't exactly endorse products. The product labels say that the company is "a proud sponsor" of the American Diabetes Association. The AHA has scruples and does not accept money from cigarette companies, so it does not endorse Post cereals — Post is owned by Kraft, which is owned by Altria, which is owned by Philip

Morris. The ADA doesn't care about that issue, so it accepts funds from Post/Kraft/Altria and allows (or used to allow) its logo on Post cereals, sweetened and not.

**As you've written, the food industry pulls in a trillion dollars a year. You've detailed how the government caves when confronted by food-industry lobbyists. What might empower our government to step up and make a greater investment in Americans' health?**

I think two things would have to change. One is campaign-financing laws, because our elected representatives are made beholden to corporations through campaign contributions. Until we fix that, we have a totally corrupt system in which congressional representatives can never make health a first priority.

The other change has to happen on Wall Street. As long as Wall Street requires companies to file quarterly growth reports every 90 days, corporations have to make short-term decisions to ensure growth rather than long-term ones that might result in healthier products. These, of course, would require fundamental changes to the society we live in, but that's really what has to happen.

**Those are both extreme measures...**

Anything else might help to some extent but is a public-health band-aid. We can ask: are band-aids useful? After all, they do stop the bleeding. So short of changing election and investment systems, you can change the way food is offered in schools. You can make it possible for kids to have a better school environment, where they can be more active and eat better. Berkeley is trying to do this. You can make fresh food available to communities. You can promote farmers' markets. You can make streets friendlier to bicycles. I can think of lots of changes on the local level that could make a big difference in people's lives, but the root causes of our obesity crisis go way back to major fundamental issues of our society.

**If people are inspired to make a change, what should they do?**

You vote with your fork. Every time you buy a food, you are making a decision about the kind of world you want to live in. If you like the status quo, you buy the cheapest food available. If you want to make a difference in protecting the environment, you buy organic. If you care about the way animals are raised or farm laborers are treated, you buy foods that are produced in better — and more expensive — ways.

Beyond individual food choices, everything else is politics. You join organizations working on the kinds of issues you care about. You write letters; you lobby organizations. I know that sounds trite, but that's in fact how the system works. I tell people who care about food issues to speak out. Exercise their political rights. And enjoy dinner.