

Food in the USA: Something to Chew Over

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Food Politics

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“Humans not know innately how to select a nutritious diet”, argues Marion Nestle. In *Food Politics* she examines the influence of the US food industry, and reflects on why we may be less healthy as a result. Nestle is a nutritionist who worked for the US Public Health Service on the Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health from 1986 to 1988; she is professor and chair of the Department of Nutrition at New York University.

The crux of *Food Politics* is the paradox that advice to eat a diet rich in fruit, vegetables, and grains has not changed in more than 50 years, yet people are increasingly confused about how to eat healthily. Nestle explains how we came to this point and provides case studies in each chapter. The book will appeal to those interested in nutrition and health, policy making, and the power of industry.

Nestle begins with an account of the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) early mission to prevent deficiencies through nutritional advice. Complications arose with overconsumption and the food industry's refusal to relinquish its “eat more” message for fear of plummeting profits. To this day the USDA has a conflict of interest in its dual mission to promote agriculture and to issue dietary advice. Nestle then explores how the US food supply can feed every American “nearly twice over”. To compete for our appetite, the food industry fights every threat of an “eat less” message, which has contributed to public confusion about what to eat.

Three hot issues in nutrition politics are then discussed: the marketing of food to children, the successful fight to deregulate vitamins and supplements in the USA, and fortifying junk food to market it as a healthy product. In 1997, 50% of the calories American children ate were from added fat and sugar, and childhood obesity rates now affect 31% of African-American girls and 29% of Mexican-American girls aged 6–11 years. Perhaps the most blatant and damaging invasion into children's diet is by soft drink companies who donate money to school districts. In exchange they demand exclusive rights to stock their products in vending machines and cafeterias. Sales of milk and juice invariably drop and students often choose soft drinks rather than food.

In the past decade, dietary supplement makers evaded strict food and drug regulatory standards. As a result, says Nestle, there is a “blurring of the distinction” between advertising and dietary advice that has led to indistinct boundaries between foods,

supplements, and drugs. Supplement makers' health claims paved the way for the marketing of foods as healthy because of added nutrients or the removal of sugar and fat. Early fortification efforts to reduce disorders that resulted from nutritional deficiencies, such as pellagra and goitre, gave way to a focus on “nutrients rather than foods”. The public is confused by claims that tout “calcium enriched” and “heart healthy”, rather than focusing on the nutritional quality of foods in general.

Despite an implicit message that less processing and marketing may be better for our diets, Nestle makes no mention of how the organic food industry fits into the market. In a bias borne of her government and academic background, she recommends strengthening the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) power, despite examples of the FDA's failed efforts to safeguard nutritional health and its repeated “neutering” at the hands of Congress.

Because she exposes rarely seen government records, Nestle documents more than might seem absolutely necessary in 55 pages of endnote references. *Food Politics* includes an appendix of nutrition terms, while food guides, media advertisements, and tables provide illustrations for her arguments.

For readers familiar with the machinations of tobacco and other big business, the fact that the food industry is more concerned with profit than our health comes as no great surprise. Nestle's outrage and her exhortations for ethical choices in the industry are idealistic, possibly a little naive. But the case examples are remarkable and the value here is in Nestle's clear, thorough documentation, which provides missing pieces in the puzzle of poor nutrition in a country where food is all too abundant.