

Force Fed Nation

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Larger portions and lack of education could take Irish waistlines to US proportions if we're not careful. Maura O'Kiely meets Marion Nestle, author of a new book on the frightening power of the food industry

Finding yourself on the same "list of dishonourables" as Osama Bin Laden may not be an accolade many aspire to, but for Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University, it was confirmation that she was doing something right.

Bin Laden was included among top 10 dishonourables compiled by the magazine Restaurant Business because he was deemed to have been bad for the American restaurant business; Nestle made it because her just published book, Food Politics, had rubbed so many in the industry up the wrong way. How did that inclusion make her feel? "It made me feel very proud," she says, still sounding pleased.

Now a second book, Safe Food - which includes an analysis of how powerful food industries in the US oppose safety regulations, deny accountability and blame consumers when something goes wrong - is not getting her any converts in the industry.

Nestle frequently writes and lectures about a broad range of topics related to food and nutrition policy. In Dublin to mark examination papers for the Dublin Institute of Technology (she has been the external examiner for their culinary arts degree for the past four years), Nestle is a good person to ask whether we should be worried about the way the food industry is heading in Ireland.

"Yes, most definitely be worried," she replies without hesitation. "If nothing else, Ireland should be very worried about the health-care costs of being overweight. There are a lot more overweight and obese people here now because people have more money, they are eating more and they are more sedentary. As overweight increases, for instance, Type 2 diabetes increases and in the States we're seeing it in younger children than ever before."

After almost 30 years of study and analysis, Nestle remains both fascinated and appalled by the food industry globally; particularly in the US where, she says, it exerts its enormous political and economic power "over virtually every meal that is eaten". She is convinced that food safety will soon become a political issue in this country.

"It's a political issue and you have to deal with it politically. Who controls and who makes decisions about the food supply are issues that should concern the Irish public because when you're in a democratic society, you want to have some public input into these kind of decisions - especially around issues as personal as what you're putting in your body.

"I also see food as a political issue because as the food supply has become more centralised, and concentrated, the larger companies are taking over the production and management of food, from production to retail. You're having much less variety and much more opportunity for disasters to occur."

Education is the answer. And the best place to do that is in schools. We need to get a concerted national effort going to have the principles of nutrition taught as part of general lifestyle practices along with other basic principles of well-being such as safe sex.

Nestle lists the basics of good health as eating a reasonable diet, balancing calories, not smoking, not drinking too much alcohol and being active. "And I don't necessarily think that people have to do vigorous physical activity but they do need to be able to walk from here to there." The better educated people are, she adds, "the more they can fight back".

Nestle asked to see some of the final thesis work of the DIT students and was encouraged to find that they are writing on interesting topics.

"They're tackling subjects such as whether there is an Irish cuisine, whether there is sex or racial discrimination in Irish restaurants and does the diet of the Irish poor differ from that of the middle class and, if so, what are the long-term effects of this? I find their papers fascinating to read. And they quote my work!"

The vexed question of food additives was a huge political issue when she first got interested in nutrition in the mid-1970s, but now hardly anyone talks about them, she says, the assumption being that "if they're not safe, they're not very unsafe".

"Their purpose is almost always cosmetic. We've just had a huge scandal in the States about the colouring of farm-raised salmon, because farm-raised salmon doesn't have that beautiful pink colour. It's an unattractive grey colour and so they were tarting it up with beta carotene. On my list of dietary worries, food additives are kind of bottom of the list."

One of the biggest changes she has noticed in the food industry over the years has been the "tremendously increased" volume of marketing targeted at selling high-profit processed foods. "And the social norm has also changed. People are eating out more, they're eating more fast food and they're snacking all day long, which advertising encourages. Larger portions alone explain the obesity epidemic in the States. Portions are so much larger than they used to be and they have risen exactly in parallel with the rising rates of obesity. Portions here in Ireland are getting bigger, but they're not as big in Ireland as in America. Even the fast food portions in McDonald's here are smaller, but I'm sure you'll get there," she adds drily.

Long-term, we need to be get political. Short-term, we should become informed and involved. More immediately, eating more fresh food on a daily basis is a good start in a better direction.

"Fresher food is healthier. There is now more and more data that shows that fresher food

has a higher vitamin content and that children who eat organic vegetables don't have as many pesticides in their bloodstream. Now that has to be good."

Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology and Bioterrorism is published by University of California Press (E28.30)