

Marion Nestle Interview: What To Eat

Gremolata

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by Malcolm Jolley

If you Google Marion Nestle it becomes pretty clear, pretty quickly, that her reputation as the world's most respected nutritionist is well founded. I had the privilege of ferrying her around Toronto recently and got to talk to her about her instant classic: [What To Eat](#).

Gremolata: I really enjoyed this book. And one of the things I really liked is that, at times, it's actually quite funny. There'd be a few lines, often at the end of a chapter, that would make me chuckle.

Marion Nestle: Well it was so much fun to do, this book. I mean look what I just found here! [Reaches into her Dominion shopping bag and brings out a box of honey nut flavoured cereal.] Here's an American sugar-coated cereal, right?

G: Right...

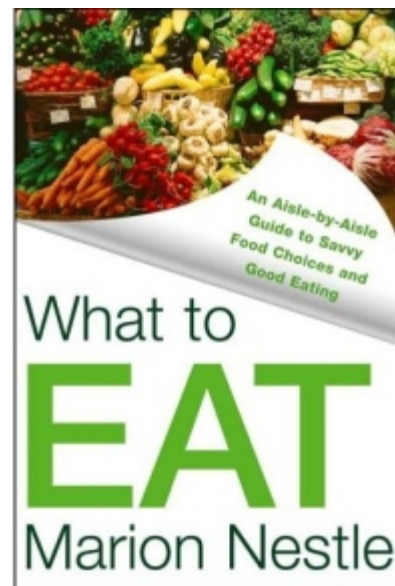
MN: And it's got a checkmark from the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation. So we go and look at the small print - this is exactly the way I wrote this book - so it says in print, that's very hard to read, "Cheerios financially supports the Heart Check Education Program of the Heart and Stroke Foundation. This is not an endorsement."

G: [Chuckles.] Right.

MN: It's not an endorsement! But just think! What would someone assume from the box? [Pulls out a box of cookies.] And this one, it has a Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation seal. Now, it says they're low saturated fats, they're low in trans-fats and they're a source of calcium and they're endorsed by the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. So I guess you can eat these cookies to prevent breast cancer. Wow! This is the best way of preventing breast cancer I've ever heard of: eat cookies!

G: This book came out of the lecture tour based on your last book, *Food Politics*, where the number one question people would ask you was "what do you eat?"

MN: Yeah, everyone was very interested in what I ate. Which was very surprising, I mean I thought, who cares? But they were really interested and since I'm a big eater and love food, I thought, Well OK, I guess I can talk about that.



G: It seems to me that the sensibility in [What To Eat](#) is commonsensical. More fruits and vegetables; all the things that you'd think everybody already knows.

MN: Ho ho! Really?

G: OK, maybe not. So then why are we always looking for a silver bullet? Something that's going to cure everything?

MN: The entire world of food marketing is set up to get people to believe in a silver bullet. There's a book coming out from Cornell professor, **Brian Wansink**, called *Mindless Eating*. It's a review of his research on environmental triggers to eating. It's very powerful research. It shows - this is the easy one - that if you give people really large portions of food they'll eat far more calories than if you give them smaller portions. You can also do that with containers, and you can do that with the shapes of glasses. He also shows it with location. He has a famous jelly bean experiment. If you put bowls of jelly beans at different locations from where people are sitting, there's a direct proportion between how close to the bowls they are sitting and how much they eat. These are things that you can be completely unaware of - it's totally unconscious. And yet food marketers know about them because they've done the research. This is the first time someone's done this research that wasn't being paid by a food company, where the results are kept proprietary.

G: Every chapter of *What To Eat* has a citing of at least one think tank, foundation or research institute of some kind that's paid for by the food companies. They seem to have all the resources.

MN: If you are a mere consumer in this environment, you are being subjected to deliberate efforts to get you to eat more unconsciously - so that you're not aware of it. This is happening all the time and they're so good at it that nobody notices. I mean there all of these comments about the way that society has changed over the last 20 years with parallel rising rates of overeating and obesity. And it makes me want to ask a series of questions. Like, when did it become OK to eat in bookstores? Anybody my age remembers when you would never do that!

I went to NYU in 1988 and there was a big sign over the entrance to the library: "No food allowed." Now, there's a cafe in the library. There is food available in business supply stores - even clothing stores! In department stores like Macy's: in San Francisco there were candy bars at the cash register. These are environmental triggers for eating more that people are completely unaware of. A vending machine is an environmental trigger. There's research that shows the more vending machines you have, the more people will buy out of them.

G: That reminds me of the passage in the book where you go to the Google company headquarters. They want your nutritional advice, so you go and they have this wonderful cafeteria with good fresh food, but when you go to the offices there are all these snack dispensers full of junk!

MN: My prediction, now that Google is publicly traded, is that as it becomes a mature company it will also be a fatter company. Right now, nobody's fat because they're all about 14 years old and their chosen means of transportation is the bicycle, which requires some calories.

G: Is this a class issue?

MN: Oh, sure. Absolutely. At least in the States. Poor people are much fatter and have fewer opportunities for being active and eating well. There's no question that there are huge areas in the cities and in rural areas where people just don't have access to decent food.

G: It's ironic that you're more likely to have access to farmers' markets, CSA and organic small production produce in the city than the country.

MN: And in North America there are areas where there isn't anything for hundreds of miles.

G: Well, at least maybe they're fishing for their dinner.

MN: You hope. But there are terrible problems with overweight...

G: And diabetes, especially in native populations.

MN: That's a direct result of overweight.

G: That reminds me of the part of the book where you talk about all the fad diets. And your explanation of why people lose weight in the first few weeks of the Atkins was as clear as I've read: they're just losing water. But the one diet you seem to have a grudging respect for is the GI.

MN: I like "grudging". That nails it. I think there might be something to it, though I don't think [the glycemic index] is as important as its proponents want us to believe. The glycemic index has been proposed as the solution to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer and all kinds of other diseases. I think that's over-hyped. But the idea that you shouldn't be eating foods that have a lot of refined carbohydrates makes a lot of sense to me.

I must say, I sat in on a session of **David Ludwig's** Pediatric Obesity Clinic [in Boston]. He's one of the proponents of the glycemic index and I watched him counsel a young overweight child and her mother. I was very impressed with his ability to explain the concept to that child and then have the child circle on her diet record all the foods that have high a glycemic index rating. The kid could do it just like that. It was also very powerful to see that 90% of what she was eating was in the high GI category. So if it's a way to do that, then it seemed to me to be very useful.

G: But how bizarre that a child would have to create a record of what they eat.

MN: If you saw what that child was eating, you would understand why that would be useful. I mean, you just have no idea how people eat. This girl's diet was junk food; carbohydrate junk food because her mother believed that "fat" was poison. So there wasn't a reasonable balance of foods containing protein, fat and carbohydrates. It was quite shocking.

So, if people fill their houses with processed foods from the centre of the supermarket aisles and they don't know how to cook or what to do with a vegetable, fruits and vegetables being a prime indicator of a healthy dietary pattern...well. If people do not understand what they should eat - and people tell me that they do not understand, then you see why there are large swaths of the population that are overweight. When I stop at a fast food place on the highway, it becomes very clear that there are a lot of people who are eating very differently from me.

G: I loved the statistic you included about the top three vegetables sold in the United States.

MN: Right: potatoes for French fries, tomatoes for ketchup and iceberg lettuce for hamburgers.

G: My two year old son loves ketchup and this reminds me of the nightly fight we have with him to try and get him to eat a vegetable other than ketchup. How do you get kids to eat well? How do I get him to eat his broccoli?

MN: I think you start with good broccoli, first of all, which might not be so easy to get. Then, you just keep at it. Just keep at it. The research shows that sometimes it takes 10 or 20 times to introduce a new food to a child. But you do it and you eat good food yourselves and sit down with them for dinner. If you want your kids to eat healthfully, then you have to eat healthfully too.

You know, I've seen schools that have changed their lunches from fast foods to what I call "adult food": from "kids' food" to adult food. Part of food marketing is to convince us that kids have to have their own food.

G: "Just for kids".

MN: Right. And when I've seen schools that have made those changes it's astonishing. The kids will eat healthy food and they like it. And they'll be critical about what they eat in a very sophisticated way.

G: You've been living in Berkeley, is this **Alice Waters'** Edible Schoolyard?

MN: Yeah, I've seen Alice Waters' project, which is so touching and moving that it

brings tears to your eyes. It's just amazing to look at. But I've also seen schools in public schools in New York where they've brought in a chef and a team to try and improve the quality of the meals. I went to one of the poorest schools in Brooklyn, in a tough area of Bushwick. It's mostly black with some Hispanic. And I saw teenage boys eating salad - enjoying salad.

G: Victory!

MN: Victory. It can be done. The principal and people from the school worked with the administrators to get those kids away from eating junk food and they did some very clever things to do it. They gave the kids choices, like having a salad bar. On the day I was there they had an enormous fruit salad of all kinds of cut up fruits that looked absolutely delicious and it was gone in a minute!

But it's tough. You have a two year old?

G: Two and a half.

MN: OK. Well he could already be brainwashed. Even if you don't have a TV in the house and you're pretty restrictive about what he can and cannot eat, your kid already knows about McDonald's.

G: Well, we try to be very protective, but he does love French fries.

MN: Sure. Of course. They're delicious. Everyone loves French fries and should have them...*once and a while*.