

How safe is our food?

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You probably know someone who buys only local, organically grown produce. She also prepares food with meticulous care -- washing her hands, scrubbing fruits and vegetables, cooking at the proper temperature, and never, ever, letting a dirty cutting board contaminate food. In other words, she's come to believe that food safety is her responsibility.

But what about our government? Haven't we been told that the United States has the safest food supply in the world?

Don't be so sure. Read Marion Nestle's new book, "Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism" (University of California, 2003) and those last 10 pounds may just melt away.

Nestle, professor and chairwoman of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University, is the author of "Food Politics," (University of California, 2002) which exposed how the food industry, by influencing government officials, scientists and nutrition professionals, affects what and how much Americans eat.

Now she explores why our food supply is far less safe than it ought to be.

But isn't it in the interest of the food industry to avoid bad publicity and expensive recalls? Of course. But food companies, like other corporations, often seek short-term profits and put the interest of stockholders before public health.

The food industry also uses its financial power to fight proposed governmental regulations. Companies resist restrictions on antibiotics in animal feed; they also refuse labels that would identify which foods contain genetically modified ingredients.

Governmental oversight, moreover, is shared by too many federal and state agencies. As a result, many food products fall between the cracks of weak regulations and infrequent inspections.

To ensure safer food, Nestle wants the federal government to create a single food agency that is responsible for the safety -- and security -- of our entire food supply.

"Food safety is a matter of politics," Nestle says. "We've got producers, processors, distributors and preparers all blaming each other for food safety problems. We need a single food agency in Washington -- independent and accountable -- to make sure that food is produced safely, from farm to table."

Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, she notes, already have such a centralized system and have reduced food-borne illnesses by testing at every stage of production.

Our government, by contrast, takes a "wait and see" attitude. We plant genetically modified corn and then deal with unexpected consequences. We conduct haphazard inspections, wait for complaints of contaminated meat or poultry, and then issue public alerts to return toxic food to the supermarket.

Nestle wants our government to adopt a "look before you leap" policy, which means testing foods -- including genetically modified agricultural products -- before they are released for public consumption.

Her discussion of genetically modified (GM) foods is worth the price of the book. Though not opposed to genetically modified foods, she calls for full disclosure so that consumers can make informed choices.

She also doubts that producing genetically modified foods is the best way to address world hunger. She understands why we find "simple approaches to such problems -- like genetically engineering vitamins into rice -- preferable to the messy business of political action to address world poverty." But it's wiser, she suggests, to address the economic inequities that produce such hunger in the first place.

So what can we consumers do? Nestle urges us to use our political power to demand that public health concerns, rather than the food industry's financial clout, determine governmental policy. She closes her book with this thoughtful reminder: "Food safety -- and food security -- are indicators of the integrity of our democratic institutions. They are worth our political commitment."