

## **Nutritionist Wants This in Your Cart: Knowledge**

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Shopping at the supermarket is a chore, a necessary domestic task that occurs sometime between busy and not-as busy.

At some point, however, grocery shopping also became complicated and overwhelming: It shouldn't take 10 minutes to decide which box of microwave popcorn to buy. It shouldn't require a math degree to figure out which permutation of toilet paper brand, style and packaging is the best deal. It shouldn't require a stop at the four corners of the produce section to see the complete selection of lettuces.

Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor at New York University, has investigated the modern supermarket in her latest book, "What To Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating" (North Point Press, 611 pages, \$30). Nestle lays out in plain language just how deliberately the grocery industry tries to wrestle away more consumer dollars and how challenging it can be to distinguish what products are worth buying.

"Supermarkets perform an enormous public service, but they're not social service agencies," Nestle said. "They're businesses and they're trying to make money. It isn't about health or feeding people. It's about selling products."

Certainly, Nestle isn't naive enough to believe that supermarkets have any motives beyond making money. But, she was stunned by just how calculated the industry is with everything from the layout of its stores to which products are placed at eye level on the shelves -- a subliminal enticement to buy those items, which also happen to be the ones that have the highest profit margins. Prime shelf space also has the highest "slotting fees," which the big food corporations are more than happy to pay to get the best exposure.

Think of it as payola for potato chips.

"People were saying to me, 'I go into a supermarket and I feel like a deer caught in the headlights.' So they wanted me to tell them what to do," Nestle said.

The chapters in "How To Eat" are arranged roughly according to a supermarket floor plan, starting with the produce section, proceeding around the perimeter of the store to the dairy, meat and seafood departments, and finally to the center aisles where the processed foods are.

For example, the four chapters under the produce category deal with the following issues: the real price of fresh fruits and vegetables, the "hype or hope" of organics, produce safety, and genetic modification. The dairy chapters wade through the numerous choices of milk (whole, low-fat, regular, soy, organic, lactose-free, hormone-free, chocolate or

strawberry or vanilla, low-carb, extra calcium, extra protein and so on), as well as yogurt (dozens of flavor combinations, differing fat content, multiple styles and sizes, separate packaging for adults and children).

Food manufacturers, Nestle explained, have stockholders to appease. They have to increase profits and the way to do that is by introducing new "value-added" products frequently. That's why you can drink your yogurt or squeeze it out of a tube, and why you have five-minute microwave macaroni and cheese or apples cut into chunks and packaged with a dipping sauce.

The industry argues that consumers still have a choice when it comes to what they buy and that they don't have to submit to marketing cajolery. But, said Nestle: "Personal choice is difficult when the deck is stacked against you."

And how. We went with Nestle to a Seattle Safeway. She walked us through the store, deciphering labelspeak and explaining some of the general deceptions used to keep customers in supermarkets so that they will spend more money. The following items are paraphrased from Nestle's comments during the shopping trip:

**Flowers:** You see either produce or flowers at the main entrance because the store wants you to feel as if you're in a beautiful place, perhaps walking through some open-air market in Europe.

**Starbucks:** The coffee outlet is another way to get you to linger in the store.

**Sale bins:** There are displays of produce that are on sale, or they're items that need to be moved quickly.

**Produce:** On this day, the organic broccoli is actually priced lower than the conventionally grown broccoli. They must need to move the product. Also, the broccoli label says it comes from California, which isn't too far from Seattle. But if this were being sold in New York, this "fresh" broccoli may not be so fresh after it has been transported by truck to multiple distribution centers, then to the store and finally put on display. The process can take up to two weeks. (Seattleites are lucky because much of the produce comes from along the West Coast, which means shorter traveling and storage time. Exceptions include items imported from Chile.)

**Meat:** The "natural" label can be confusing because there isn't a strict standard that meat producers have to follow in order to use that term. So a "natural" product may be better than a conventionally raised animal, but it doesn't guarantee -- like the USDA's certified organic seal -- that rigorous standards were followed. If you're concerned about hormones or mad cow disease, buy certified organic. (You can find value-added products, such as the heat-and-serve pot roast, in the meat department, but such items, while convenient, tend to be loaded with sodium and they're not as cost-effective as preparing your own.)

**Seafood:** Many seafood counters are bad about COOL (country of origin labeling), even though it is required by federal law. COOL is supposed to help inform consumers where the seafood was harvested, which can indicate whether certain products are better choices than others when it comes to freshness and contamination concerns. The label should state whether the seafood was farmed or wild. The farther the item has to travel, the less fresh it is.

**Dairy:** Safeway, in particular, has introduced its own organics line (the packaging for which happens to resemble the house brand at Whole Foods). The Safeway organic milk is priced lower than the national organic brands. The yogurt section probably has a couple hundred choices and many of them contain enough sugar (in all its forms) to qualify them as dessert. Not all yogurts can be considered "healthy" because the sugars and fats cancel out the positive qualities. Read the labels. Look for yogurts that don't have a long list of ingredients. If high fructose corn syrup is high on the list, you might skip it. Sometimes, you have to turn to specialty or imported varieties (such as Fage from Greece) to get unadulterated yogurt.

**Cereal:** If the box has a health claim or a cartoon character on it, don't buy it. Even if the cereal has the stamp of approval from, say, the American Heart Association, it doesn't mean the overall healthfulness of the cereal is guaranteed. It still could contain too much sugar. The health claims make people think that if they eat a particular cereal it will cure what ails them. Look for the "healthy" (and less-profitable) cereals on the top shelf. (In the book, Nestle writes that four companies -- General Mills, Kellogg, Post/Kraft/Altria, Quaker/PepsiCo -- control 83 percent of commercial cereal sales.)

**Snack foods:** In this store, the aisle is strategically situated next to the video-rental department. Chips and such have little nutritional value when compared to the amount of calories they contain. All you're getting are sugars, sodium and empty calories. Even the products that advertise "no trans fats" or are low in sodium don't have any nutritional value. Snack foods are meant to be snacks, a little something to munch on, not a meal substitute.

**Final words:** Nestle, whose name rhymes with "vessel" and who is not linked to the Nestle food empire, doesn't believe there is one formula for everyone. In general, she said, people need to eat less and exercise more. Food choices should be sensible, with a focus on whole foods (organic or conventional) simply prepared versus overprocessed convenience products. It's all right to enjoy snack foods, but do so sparingly.

"I hope that learning this kind of thing empowers people to make better decisions," Nestle said, "and not to feel helpless."

## **SHOPPING SMARTLY**

Skinless chicken has hardly any saturated fat, but the minute it is breaded and fried the grams go up. If you eat the skin, you may as well be eating a hamburger.

It is not always easy to make sense of the research on trans fats but here's the short answer: If you can avoid trans fats, you should. These fatty acids may be only a small part of your total dietary fat, but small changes in your diet can add up to significant health benefits, and this is one change that is well worth making.

One way to view non-dairy creamers is as nothing more than white, sweet, liquid margarine.

Overall, whole fruits are a better nutritional bet than juices, and fresh juices are better than frozen. When you see a juice labeled "pulp free," look for another option. (The pulp is where the nutrition is.)

If you want more healthful frozen foods, look for packages with short ingredient lists.

Most people need to drink at least two quarts of water a day. But these quarts do not have to come from water itself; they also can come from food, juice, coffee, tea, soda and anything else with water in it. sIf you offer healthful foods, your children will have the chance to eat them. If you offer junk foods to your children, they will eat junk foods.

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