

Something to Read Before Your Next Meal

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FOR anyone who has ever wondered why scientists and the public are so often at loggerheads over issues of food safety, Marion Nestle's provocative new book, "Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology and Bioterrorism" (University of California Press, 2003), provides something of an answer.

"For reasons of history, inertia, turf disputes and just plain greed," she writes, "government oversight of food safety has long tended to provide far more protection to food producers than to the public."

Dr. Nestle is chairwoman of the nutrition and food studies department at New York University. A year ago, in "Food Politics" (University of California Press), she sent the food industry into a lather when she blamed it for the growing obesity problem in the United States. Now she is sure to enrage the industry and others even further: at bottom, Dr. Nestle's view is that food companies choose profits over safety, and that the hamstrung government does little to stop them.

It may not be able to. Dr. Nestle's history of governmental attempts to regulate food in the United States reveals a system that, she writes, is "breathtakingly irrational": there are presently 35 separate laws on the subject, administered by 12 agencies housed in six cabinet-level departments.

The result is high bureaucratic comedy. The Department of Agriculture oversees production of hot dogs cooked in pastry dough and corn dogs, while for no discernible reason, the Food and Drug Administration regulates bagel dogs and hot dogs meant to be served in buns. (Similarly, the Agriculture Department regulates the production of pepperoni pizza, while the F.D.A. regulates plain cheese pizza.)

Against this backdrop, Dr. Nestle compares the American system with the food safety systems in place in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, where food-borne illnesses have been reduced at every stage of production. The United States does not fare well.

"Rather than collaborating to reduce food-borne pathogens" as is regularly done abroad, she reports, the patchwork of United States government agencies and the food companies themselves "shift attention to consumer education as the best way to ensure safe food."

"Failing that," she writes, "they call for foods to be irradiated or pasteurized."

A chapter on biotechnology repeats the same themes, but Dr. Nestle adds a fascinating explanation of the differences between "science-based" and "value-based" approaches to evaluating food safety risks. Pure science alone, she says, does not provide enough information to make a decision about what is safe to eat -- "perceptions, opinions and

values" must also be considered.

For example, Dr. Nestle explains, while bioengineered food is proclaimed to be safe, consumers may feel that not enough testing has been done. The science-based approach, Dr. Nestle believes, also obscures the point that "other issues also matter." A value-based evaluation also considers matters like unintended consequences, effect on rural life and environmental concerns.

Dr. Nestle uses a wonderful passage from a 1982 book by Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, and Aaron Wildavsky, a political scientist, to underscore the point. "The risk experts claim to depoliticize an inherently political problem," they wrote. "Science and risk assessment cannot tell us what we need to know about threats of danger since they explicitly try to exclude moral ideas about a good life."

Dr. Nestle concludes that the failure of food companies, scientists and federal agencies to address values as well as science has led to widespread distrust of the food industry and its regulators.

"When officials and experts dismiss dread-and-outrage concerns as emotional, irrational, unscientific and indefensible," she writes, "they raise questions about their own credibility and competence."

Dr. Nestle has repeated the clearheaded thinking that made "Food Politics" an important addition to the debate about food in this country.

Her ability to look at issues as both a scientist and a consumer makes her a particularly useful source when food safety is up for discussion. Such sources are few and far between.