

## Supermarket Sleuth

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By Katharine Mieszkowski

### **Stalking the aisles of America's grocery stores, "What to Eat" nutritionist Marion Nestle tells you how to keep junk food from sneaking into your cart.**

Jun. 12, 2006 | If you've seen "Super Size Me," Morgan Spurlock's hilarious documentary about fast food, you've already met Marion Nestle. She's the only person in the movie who is able to offer a coherent definition of a calorie.

Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food science and public health at New York University, has long been a leading critic of the salty, fatty, sugary junk that passes for food in America, and especially the way it's hawked to kids. She blasts the U.S. government for allowing the food industry to determine public health policy on everything from the food pyramid to trans fats. And her books, such as "Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health," have inspired such fear and trembling from Big Food that she's been smeared as a "diet scold" and, even more feverishly, as "one of the country's most hysterical anti-food-industry fanatics."

Nestle's new book, "What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating," brings her analysis of food politics into the grocery store, giving shoppers advice on what to buy and what to leave on the shelves. Armed with a notebook and calculator, Nestle spent a year in the field -- or, in this case, the produce, beverage, cereal and dairy aisles -- making observations about what's actually being sold. She came away stunned at the blizzard of choices offered up in the average Safeway or Kroger, and how easy it is for consumers to be bamboozled by marketing messages masquerading as nutritional data.

In "What to Eat," Nestle demystifies the American foodscape, exposing the ways that nutritional advice is tainted by food marketers and the diet industry. Readers will find there's much to be learned by taking a 611-page extended shopping trip with her. For starters, many foods with healthy reputations -- most yogurt and fruit drinks and many cereals, even those promoted as high-fiber or high-protein -- are loaded with sugars, and should be treated as dessert, not breakfast. Junk food is fortified and packaged to make it sound healthier than it is: As Nestle writes, "Vitamin-enriched sodas are still sodas. Organic gummi bears are still candy. Trans fat-free snack foods are still salty and full of rapidly absorbable carbohydrates." And, sorry, raw cookie-dough eaters; today's eggs are more likely to be contaminated with salmonella than they were just a few decades ago.

But there are lots of tasty morsels to savor in "What to Eat," too, which, as the title suggests, is actually a compendium of what *to* eat, not just what to avoid. Salon met with Nestle for lunch in her temporary office at the University of California at Berkeley, where she is a visiting professor this year. She split an enormous, delicious

sandwich -- corn, carrot, avocado and cheese on whole-grain bread -- from a local cafe with this interviewer, while reflecting on how portion size has gotten out of control.

**You begin with some simple health recommendations: eat less, exercise more and eat lots of fruits and vegetables. Why is the American food industry so at odds with those goals?**

Because they don't want us eating less, of course. The American food supply produces 3,900 calories a day for every man, woman and child in the country. That's twice as much food as we need. So, if you're in the food business, you've got to figure out a way to sell it. The choices are to get people eating your product instead of somebody else's, to get people to eat more in general, or to raise prices. In that situation, obesity is collateral damage.

**What are some strategies food companies use to make us eat more?**

Larger portions. If you put a larger portion of food in front of somebody, they will eat more, even if they're not hungry, even if they're on a diet, even if they're a nutritionist. They're going to eat more. That overrides some kind of internal control.

Having food available is incentive to eat more -- just having it around. And in fact, there's research that shows the closer the food is to you physically, the more you'll eat of it.

As we've started to get food offered in more places, at more times, and in larger portions, there have been changes in society. All of a sudden it's OK to eat in bookstores, and in libraries and clothing stores -- places where there used to be signs that said don't bring food in here, because it would attract cockroaches, and get coffee on the clothes. Now, in most places, you're encouraged to eat, drink and be merry.

**Many diets focus specifically on one supposedly bad ingredient -- like fat or carbs -- but don't tell people to eat less, and don't stress calories. Why do popular diets focus on what we eat, not how much we eat?**

Nobody can understand calories -- at least most people can't. It's so much easier to think that if I just cut out this one ingredient, I'll lose weight. It's simple.

**One of your beefs is that food manufacturers make all kinds of positive health claims about unhealthy foods.**

They make no sense at all if you think about it for a moment. Here's a good one.

[Picks up a box of macaroni and cheese off a table in her office. Hands it to the interviewer.]

**[Reading from the box] "Super Mac & Cheese pasta and sauce from Kraft. Excellent source of calcium. Good source of vitamin B, C, D and E. Good source of whole grains."**

Now, is that not the most ridiculous thing you've ever seen?

**"Helps kids build strong bones." That's the calcium and vitamin D.**

So, if you eat that it's going to help kids have strong bones.

**"Whole grains. Important for good health. Provides one half serving."**

(Laughs.) Oh, dear. So, I'm going to have good health if I eat that, never mind how much salt or fat it has. And it's a "Sensible Solution." That Kraft's self-endorsement for its better-for-you food products.

It's macaroni and cheese, and it's not even high-quality cheese. If you use the classic preparation, it's nearly 400 calories. It's got 4.5 grams of saturated fat, which is a quarter of your daily allowance. It's got 600 milligrams of sodium. It has 25 percent of a day's allowance of sodium. It's processed up the wazoo. It's salty. I wouldn't call it a health food. But they're selling it as a health food.

**So many things are being sold as health foods now by putting vitamins into junk foods. But aren't most Americans already getting all the vitamins they need?**

There are people who have iron deficiencies and anemia, but vitamin deficiencies are not a major public health problem in this country. But, yes, there's the general feeling that when it comes to vitamins, more must be better.

**So, if 100 percent of vitamin C is good, then 300 percent must be better?**

It must be three times as good.

**And that's not true?**

There's not much evidence to support it.

**So, how would you suggest shoppers navigate the supermarket?**

I have these facetious rules. Always shop the periphery. Don't go into the center aisles. If you do go into the center aisles, don't buy anything with more than five ingredients. If you can't pronounce the ingredients on the package label, don't buy it. Don't buy anything with a cartoon on it. If you don't want your kids eating junk food, don't have it in the home.

**But even foods that seem very basic, like bread, have misleading health claims on the packaging. For instance, at home I was looking at my bread, and the wrapper reads: "In a low fat diet, whole grain foods like this bread may reduce the risk of heart disease." Well, sure, if the rest of your diet is low-fat. It's almost Orwellian.**

It is. It's double-speak. But people fall for it, because they're not trained. If you get people to think for one second about whether eating that bread is going to help them

prevent heart disease, no rational person is going to believe that. But you don't think that way. You think: "Oh, this is a healthy product. And healthy products are good." I fall for it, too.

You forget about the calories. [Gestures to the macaroni and cheese box.] This is like taking a vitamin pill, right? And you forget that it's a 350-calorie vitamin pill.

**You're enthusiastic about organic food. Why should people choose organic?**

One reason absolutely overrides all others. There are no pesticides or chemical fertilizers used in the process, which means it's much less harmful for the environment and for farmworkers. Certainly organic farms can be about as productive, and the food is at least as nutritious, and quite possibly more nutritious than conventional or industrially grown products.

**There's been a lot of controversy about the organic standard. What makes you trust it?**

I talked to a lot of people who are in the organic business -- farmers, producers, product developers, inspectors -- and they all think it's legit. Everybody involved with it seems to feel that it is a process with a lot of integrity. For one reason: they all watch each other. And really, the only thing that they have going for them is the credibility of the process, and if that process isn't credible, it's going to hurt everybody.

That said, there is tremendous pressure on organic farmers to cut corners, and those pressures come not only from the USDA, but also from Congress and the industrial food industry. To the extent that politics can weaken the organic standards, the industry does stand to lose the credibility that they're now holding onto with their fingernails.

**Do conventional food producers want us to think that the organic certification process is corrupt?**

Of course they do. They want you to think that organic production is dirtier, because it uses natural fertilizer. They want you to think it's not as productive. They want you to think that it's less nutritious.

**What about some of the other claims we see on packaging about production conditions, like eggs that are cage-free or coffee that's shade grown? How can shoppers evaluate which claims to trust?**

I think that's a big problem. Some of those certifications have inspection systems, but you have no way of knowing what the integrity of those inspections are. Consumer Reports has a Web site that now has dozens and dozens and dozens and dozens of certifiers listed on it.

One of the advantages of certified organic is that it is a unified, centralized evaluation system with a very clear set of guidelines. I find those other categories impossible to keep straight. Not only do you have Fair Trade Certified and Rainforest Certified, but you also have the self-endorsements. All of the big companies are self-endorsing their own products, trying to convince you they are health foods. Ask Kraft why they advertise "Sensible Solutions" as a health food, and they'll say, "No, no, no. We're advertising this as a better-food choice."

**You point out that there are many foods that seem like health foods, but when you examine them more closely they're loaded with sugar. For instance, yogurt has this really great reputation, but actually almost all of it has so much...**

Sugar. Or candy. There's yogurt that comes with chocolate chips. Or M&Ms. Or things that look like fruit.

**Food products that are sold to athletes, like energy bars and Gatorade -- is it really just marketing that makes people think that those things are healthy for them?**

Yeah. Rather than a Power Bar, I'd rather have a really good candy bar, if I want to get a couple hundred calories in a hurry. Or a banana.

**What about vitamin water? If you drink vitamin water, are you actually getting vitamins?**

Oh, sure, if it has vitamins in it. You won't absorb all of them, but you'll absorb some. But why not take a vitamin pill, or eat something? I don't get it, except that they come in a classy bottle. They look gorgeous.

You're buying status. You're buying status and the aura of health. The ones with vitamins have to be sweetened; otherwise they'd taste terrible.

**Can you talk about some of the tricks that food manufacturers use to disguise the sugar in their products. Like using four different names for sugar?**

[Picks up a box of Reese's Puffs cereal. Reads ingredient list.]

Sugar, peanut butter, molasses, dextrose, corn syrup, cocoa. It's got at least four kinds of sugar in it. It's got sugar. Then, it's got sugar in the peanut butter, molasses, dextrose, corn syrup. All of those are sugar. No wonder it's so sweet. Amazing. Would you feed your kids candy for breakfast? I don't think you would, if you thought about it as candy.

It says, "Good source of whole grains. 12 vitamins and minerals. Good source calcium." It has 12 grams of sugar. 48 calories come from sugar, so in a three-quarter cup, 130-calorie serving about 30 percent of the calories come from sugar. It's awfully sweet, and it has a bad aftertaste, which is from all of the additives, I'm sure.

### **Are people likely to eat that portion size?**

It depends on how old they are, how big they are. That's another thing people don't have an intuitive feel for -- the idea that larger portions have more calories.

### **Even people who are old enough to know better don't realize how many calories are in a giant soda?**

Eight times 100 is 800 calories. Everybody ought to be able to figure that out, but you can't imagine how many people don't make that leap. I've gone around the country talking about food politics, and one year, three times in three different locations in the country, a pediatrician got up and said: "I'm a pediatrician, I have a lot of overweight kids in my practice, and it's not unusual for me to see these kids reporting drinking 1,200, 1,500, 2,000 calories a day from soft drinks alone." Even if it's 1,200 at the low end, that's one-half of a day's caloric intake for an average person, and you can bet that they're eating plenty of other things, too.

### **What did you find most surprising when you were going aisle by aisle in the grocery store?**

The complexity of the choices floored me. For instance, I went to one store and I tried to find out how many different kinds of romaine lettuce they sold. It turned out that they had seven different kinds.

Lettuce is sold by the head, by the bag, by the pound. There is an organic type. There is one that's bagged for salad, in which case you're paying to have somebody cut it up for you. But they were all priced the same -- between \$2.50 and \$2.99 a bag. Only when I broke each sample down to price per pound, did I see that prices ranged from \$1 to \$4. But that was very hard to figure out.

And while there are *some* certified organic meats, mostly there are just "natural" meats. What astounded me was that nobody selling meat could tell the difference between the two. Fish took five chapters of my book to sort out, because there were so many issues, and at the end I threw up my hands and said: get a fish advisory card. You can't do it without it. Nobody can just keep this stuff straight.

### **So the government and the industry basically says to shoppers: It's your problem to figure it out yourself?**

It took me a year to do the research for this book, and sometimes it was days of going back to the store over and over and over again, calling people, and going online, and looking things up in books, and doing the things that researchers do. Consumers can't do that. That's why we have government to try to make it so consumers don't have to do that. But we're in a very corporate-friendly era right now. And government has, in some ways, stepped out of the picture under pressure from corporations.

**What's the political solution to that? You argue that we should vote with our forks and our pocketbooks.**

And write your congressional representatives, and join organizations. I would hope that one of the outcomes of this book is that people not only feel like they have more control over what they're buying, but also get involved in the political process, because that's where the changes need to be made.

**In the past few months, a handful of high-profile books have come out about corporate food and the politics of food. Do you think we're in the midst of a backlash against the food industry?**

I wouldn't call it a backlash. I would call it a social movement, a national, if not international, social movement to try to do something about food, for children in particular. There are attempts in school districts all over the country to try to do something about what's going on in school lunches, and nutrition education in schools.

It's easier for people to get involved in politics around food issues than it is around the war in Iraq or climate change. Those are huge global issues, which are so far beyond most people's daily experience, but everybody eats. So, just by the simple act of going into a store, and choosing organic, you're making a statement about the way that you want food grown, and a lot of people are willing to pay for that.

**Salon recently interviewed Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and one thing he said was that it might be worth it to pay \$6 for a dozen eggs, if they were the right eggs. He argued that a lot of people can afford to pay more for food than they do today. That comment got a group of our readers fired up about how elitist it seemed.**

Go tell that to Whole Foods. They're making a mint off of customers who are willing to pay a premium because they believe that what Whole Foods is doing is providing better food in a way that addresses issues, like sustainable agriculture, that concern them deeply.

But the charge of elitism is a complicated one and I take it seriously, since a lot of my career has been about trying to develop better access to food for the poor. I once heard Eric Schlosser discuss that issue, very directly. We were at a business school, and he was being attacked right and left. And I thought he handled it beautifully when he pointed out that some of the most important social movements in history were started by elites. Social movements have to start someplace, and he pointed to the anti-slavery movement, the women's movement and the environmental movements as movements that started out as elite, but ultimately would end up resulting in a better life for a much broader group of people.

For instance, I visited the Edible Schoolyard, which is run by Alice Waters, whom many people have accused of being extraordinarily elitist. Her restaurant is very expensive, but I've seen the Edible Schoolyard, and we are not talking about elite kids

here. We are talking about a public school class, very mixed racially and ethnically, filled with immigrant kids, with poor kids.

**You bring up restaurant food. Since people eat out a lot more than they used to, what are some strategies for eating better when you go out?**

The real problem with restaurant food is the sizes of the meals that they give you. The secret is not to order too much. I was in a really good restaurant just last week, and we ordered a chicken dish for two. And they brought out this platter, and I said: "Two? This is six."

**Why have portions gotten so big?**

The food industry has to sell more food, and one way to do that is to make larger portions. Also, people are willing to pay a higher premium for a larger portion than they are for smaller portions. If you want to entice people to eat more food, you give them a bargain. People love bargains, and have no concept of the relationship between size and calories. In fact, these days, they feel cheated if you give them what is a reasonable amount of food to eat for one person.

Restaurants can make these larger portions because the big costs of restaurants have to do with the costs of production. The costs come from labor, the rent, the real estate, the packaging. The food itself isn't that expensive.

**What kind of changes would most improve mainstream grocery stores?**

I would like to see a complete restriction on health claims on food packages. I think that they confuse customers. They're misleading.

I would also like to see a complete cessation of direct marketing to children. That means no cartoons on food products. Period. I would like to see some restructuring of stores to make it easier for people who are seeking healthier products to find them. Start by putting healthier products at eye level. Have occasional cut apples out to taste so you could tell what the differences are before you buy them. Make cooking instructions available for the more exotic things that people do not know what to do with. Show customers how easy it is to cook.

I'd also like to see country-of-origin labeling on produce so that people can have an idea of how far it has traveled. In November, a store near me in Manhattan had four ounces of blueberries for \$6. They came from Patagonia. I thought that there was something quite strange about that.

**So all this parsing of this vitamin vs. that vitamin -- you're basically arguing is not as important as generally eating a bigger variety...**

...of healthy food. Yes, and not worrying about it so much. Just enjoy it.

-- By Katharine Mieszkowski