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## Truth or consequences

### Book explores grocery shopping's hidden burdens

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July 26, 2006

Should we spend the extra arm and leg for organic food, or not? How do we know whether our food has been irradiated or genetically modified, or even where it comes from? Do the pluses of added vitamins in breakfast cereals outweigh the negatives of their high sugar content?

We shouldn't feel bad about our supermarket befuddlement. After all, even Marion Nestle confesses to it.

Nestle is professor and chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. She's received a lifetime achievement award from the James Beard Foundation. She has written several books, including "Food Politics" and "Safe Food," and appeared in the movie "Super Size Me." You would think she knows her way 'round the market.

Yet here is Nestle in her newest book, "What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating" (North Point, \$30):

"I looked at the products on those shelves just as any shopper might, and tried to figure out which ones made the most sense to buy for reasons of taste, health, economy or any number of social issues that might be of concern. Doing this turned out to be more complicated than I could have imagined. For one thing, it required careful reading of food labels, which, I can assure you, is hard work even for nutritionists."

But don't blame yourself, Nestle counsels.

"If you have trouble dealing with supermarkets, it is for a good reason," she writes. "You need to know an amazing amount about our food system and about nutrition to make intelligent choices, but most of this information is anything but obvious. It is not supposed to be obvious. Supermarkets have one purpose and one purpose only: to sell food and make a profit, and as a large a profit as possible."

Armed with Nestle's book, however, you'll be able to make all the decisions you need to make. She looks at health, environmental and sustainability issues, and everything else

related to our food choices. Her research will permit you to make informed decisions about everything you eat, whether at home or out.

The book is fascinating reading, but it's not a light read, literally or figuratively. At 611 pages, it weighs about three pounds, too heavy to prop on your tummy to read at bedtime. You wouldn't be able to read yourself to sleep with it, anyhow, because much of the information is simply eye-popping. Even if you halfway knew some of it, you'll still be stunned.

The price of raw Idaho potatoes (New York City, December 2004): 79 cents per pound. The price of Lays Olean light chips (with olestra, the fat substitute)? \$7.65 a pound. The price of Terra Yukon Gold chips? \$10.21 a pound. Do you want to pay as much for potato chips as you pay for London Broil? I don't.

Grams of sugar in Starbucks' Tazo chai green iced tea (12 ounces, July 2005)? 15 grams, about a tablespoon. Grams of sugar in a same-sized Chai Creme Frappuccino? Forty-seven grams, or more than three tablespoons. All sugars have four calories per gram, Nestle points out, so 188 of that Frappuccino's 280 calories come from sugars. I wouldn't put three tablespoons of sugar in my morning coffee; would you?

Nestle is nothing if not thorough and a serious scientist to boot. It should come as no surprise that many in the food industry detest her. Activistcash.com, an offshoot of the industry-funded Center for Consumer Freedom, called her "one of the country's most hysterical anti-food-industry fanatics." Fox News criticized her "junk science" when one of her previous books was published, and blasted her "concealed bias" against the food industry.

Such attacks seem outrageously aggressive, considering Nestle's core advice for good health. It boils down to three phrases and 10 words:

Eat less.

Move more.

Eat lots of fruits and vegetables.

If you want to make it more complicated, says Nestle, add five more words:

Go easy on junk food.

To have someone of Nestle's stature demystify my supermarket is a tremendous help, as I try to decide among the 30,000 to 40,000 items it carries, on average. Perhaps you will appreciate her help as well.

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