

Voting With a Fork: The Politics of Food



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SAN FRANCISCO--From California, where it's grown, to a destination like Manhattan, prepackaged spinach can stew for 10 to 14 days before it hits grocery store aisles.

That bit of unsettling news isn't something shoppers would likely see advertised in stores. Rather, it took some sleuthing by a nutritionist who was researching an upcoming book to find out how "fresh" spinach in a bag really is.

"It took quite a long time to find anyone who would divulge that piece of information. And I could see why," said Marion Nestle, scientist, New York University professor and author of "Food Politics" and the new tome, "What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating," which is due to come out May 2. Nestle spoke here this week about food politics in the United States, as part of San Francisco's City Arts and Lectures series.

Without a doubt, people love to eat. What's less enjoyable for many health-conscious consumers is the confusion and anxiety brought on by deciding what--and how much--food to eat. From carbohydrates and trans-fats to antioxidants and mercury, most people are baffled trying to identify what a truly "healthy" lifestyle is. The details of diseases, ingredients and nutrients seem to change weekly, based on new diet fads or research studies. Food labeling alone is enough to make people's head spin. Eggs, for example, can be conventional, brown or white, locally grown, organic or "United Egg Producers Certified," not to mention the various brands under which they are sold.

So who benefits from this confusion about nutrition and health? Nestle argues in her book "What to Eat" that the food, restaurant, fast-food, diet, health-club, drug and health-care industries all benefit most. For the health-care industry, for example, it would cost more to provide preventive services for an entire population than to pay for treatment for a smaller population that becomes ill, according to her book, which cites economic studies.

All this boils down to food politics. Under a government Nestle described as "corporate friendly" and having a closed approach to food safety and related problems, researching details about the food supply in the United States can be tough.

Yet the food supply and its politics may be more important than ever as the nation grapples with an epidemic of childhood obesity and threats of food-borne illnesses like the avian flu. Potential threats to the food and water supply through bioterrorism is another significant worry.

Obesity is, by far, America's biggest problem in food politics, Nestle said. Curbing the amount of food people eat is an uphill battle because the food industry constantly pushes consumers to eat more, not less, she said.

"The deep dark secret of American agriculture (revealed only by agricultural economists behind closed doors)," Nestle writes, "is that there is far too much food available--3,900 calories per day for every man, woman and child in the country, whereas the average adult needs only a bit more than half that amount, and children much less."

As a result, the food industry--worth almost a trillion dollars annually--makes food more convenient (already washed, prepackaged spinach, for example), served in larger portions, easier to access and cheaper so that people will eat and buy more. In this regard, the food industry's goal of making profits can be diametrically opposed to a consumer's goal of being healthy, according to Nestle.

Visiting the San Francisco Bay Area to promote her new book and act as guest professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Nestle contends that if people want to protect the integrity of the food supply in the U.S. and abroad, they must get involved with the legislative process and "vote with their forks."

"When you choose organics, you are voting for a planet with fewer pesticides, richer soil and cleaner water supplies--all better in the long run. When you choose locally grown produce, you're voting for conservation of fuel resources and the economic viability of local communities," she wrote.

Yet even organics face political turmoil.

To get a certified organic seal, a food producer must follow a phonebook-thick set of rules set by the Department of Agriculture, Nestle said. Among those rules, the food cannot be grown with chemical pesticides, antibiotics, hormones or chemical fertilizers. After interviewing a range of inspectors, food producers and suppliers, she said certified organic producers largely follow the letter of the rules, with few breaking them purposely.

Yet the certified organic rules are under constant attack by Congress and big organics--the companies that entered the organic business because they can charge more for the foods, she said. Those parties want to weaken the rules by adding chemicals to organic food but keep the same label, Nestle said.

"We need to keep organic standards free from the influence of big business. I can tell you it's not going to be easy to do," she said.

Is organic food healthier?

Nestle said that, without a doubt, if food is labeled "certified organic," it's better for consumers and for the planet.

Yet many people can't afford the higher price that comes with certified organic foods. Milk, for example, is a staple food, but can cost double the price if it's certified organic. (She also says that grocery store marketers put milk in the back of the store so that people buy things they see in the aisles.) Conventional milk, however, can contain cow growth hormones such as bovine somatotropin (bST), which is genetically engineered, as well as antibiotics injected to protect overcrowded cows from getting sick.

Nestle said that if a consumer can afford no other organic products, organic milk should be the priority.

One ray of hope for U.S. food politics is what Nestle described as a "grassroots social movement" in communities around the country, aimed at counteracting child obesity and the phenomenon of buying foods from across the country when those same foods are farmed locally. One example she cited was the famous chef Alice Waters' program "Edible Schoolyard," in which adults teach kids to cook from a local garden.

Outside of paying attention to politics, Nestle advises that people simply, "eat less, move more, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and go easy on the junk funks."

As for the leafy greens: "In Manhattan, I would not buy spinach in a bag," she said. "If you hold it up to the light, you can see the slime on it."

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