

We Are (Still) What We Eat

Epicurious

2006

By Irene Sax

Food guru Marion Nestle helps us safely navigate the supermarket aisles

Is margarine better than butter? Soy milk healthier than cow's? What exactly does it mean when the label on the bottle says "vegetable oil"? It's no wonder that we're all confused when we go shopping for food these days, writes Marion Nestle in her stunning new book, *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*.

With often-conflicting nutrition studies coming at us from one side and manipulative marketing techniques from the other, choosing a healthy diet seems more complicated than ever before. Nestle, who is both a professor of nutrition and a supermarket shopper, wrote this book to help consumers like you and me feel less confused about what to buy and what to eat.

Epicurious: Your book is called *What to Eat*, but it doesn't really tell us. Why the title?

Marion Nestle: Because as soon as people find out what I do, they ask me: What should I eat? Is canned tuna okay? Is organic food worth the money? I decided to write a book that would walk readers up and down the aisles of the supermarkets and tell them not what to eat, but how to make informed decisions about what they eat.

Epi: You're a Ph.D. and nutritionist. It must have been easy for you.

MN: Far from it. I was surprised to discover how much you need to know to make an informed choice. I always took a computer with me to figure out prices and labels. The average supermarket has something like 40,000 different items, and one I went to stocked more than 400 kinds of yogurt on its shelves. If you tried to figure out which one was cheapest and healthiest, you'd be there forever.

Epi: Then let's start with the question everyone asks you. What should we eat?

MN: You can describe a healthy diet in ten words: "Eat less, move more, eat lots of fruits and vegetables." If that's not enough, add "Go easy on junk foods." That's the whole secret. I've been saying the same thing for years. It's not rocket science: Everyone knows what you have to do. What makes it so difficult is that the whole system is set up to make it difficult. The system is stacked against you, sometimes deliberately.

"No single food is good or bad:
We're designed to eat a variety of things."

Epi: What do you mean deliberately stacked against you?

MN: Take the layout of a typical supermarket. Why is the dairy case at the back of the store? Because the owner wants us to walk all the way down those long aisles where we'll

be exposed to thousands of temptations on our way to buy the quart of milk on most shopping lists.

Or take pricing. You may not want to buy a gallon bottle of soda. But when you realize that eight ounces from a huge bottle works out to be much cheaper than eight ounces from a smaller bottle, it seems wasteful not to buy the supersized one.

Epi: But surely we don't have to drink it all.

MN: That's true, but stopping takes more self control than most of us have. I call it the Law of Portion Size: The more food is in front of us, the more we eat. There's a lot of research showing that cleaning your plate is a powerful determinant. It's probably the main reason why Americans have gained so much weight.

Epi: Let's talk about specific foods. It seems that eggs are good for us again. Is that true?

MN: No single food is good or bad: We're designed to eat a variety of things. Eggs have to be viewed in the context of the rest of your diet — if you eat them, you should cut back on other high-cholesterol foods.

Remember that all over the world people grow, flourish, and do well as long as they get enough calories and variety. Marketers want you to think you have to eat their product to be healthy, but that makes no sense from a biological standpoint. I've seen too many "miracle foods" to believe that I can't be healthy without blueberries or soy or pomegranate juice.

Epi: Not even yogurt?

MN: Yogurt is milk and has the nutrient value of milk. All those studies about people living to a great age because they eat yogurt are questionable. What's not questionable is that marketing people have managed to convince Americans that this too-often-oversweetened dairy dessert is actually a health food. Eating yogurt certainly won't hurt you, as long as you watch the calories.

Epi: How come you're a fan of frozen fruits and vegetables?

MN: They're not a bad compromise in winter when you can't get local produce. They're picked at the peak of their freshness and flavor, and retain most of their nutritional value. In January they even look a lot better than the stuff that has been trucked across the country or flown in from South America. Of course, fresh and local is best, but what do you do in midwinter in New England?

Epi: Why are you opposed to fortifying junk food with vitamins?

MN: I eat candy and think it has its place in everyone's life, but I don't like to see it advertised as a health food. If you want extra vitamins, take a pill. (Although the truth is that most Americans aren't vitamin deficient.) Now they're putting vitamins in soft drinks to make you think that the sugar water will give you a nutritional benefit. Forget about it. It's just a calorie distracter.

Epi: Okay, I get it that you're not going to tell *me* what to eat. But what about kids? What should they eat?

MN: Exactly what we do, only less of it, and with a little less salt and sugar. If you look at the Dietary Guidelines you'll see they're for everyone over the age of two. People are surprised when I tell them that, because advertising has convinced them that kids are supposed to eat foods made just for them. There's a gigantic and very profitable industry set up just to market directly to kids. Think about that the next time you see a toddler throwing a tantrum in the supermarket because his parents won't buy the box of cereal he wants.

