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FEATURING

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## The State of Nutrition Education - What's Missing?

with Marion Nestle

Marion Nestle is Paulette Goddard Professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health and Professor of Sociology at New York University. Her degrees include a Ph.D. in molecular biology and an M.P.H. in public health nutrition, both from the University of California, Berkeley. She has been a member of the FDA Food Advisory Committee and Science Board, the USDA/DHHS Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, and American Cancer Society committees that issue dietary guidelines for cancer prevention. Her research focuses on how science and society influence dietary advice and practice. She is the author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, and *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety*, and *What to Eat*. She writes a monthly Food Matters column for the San Francisco Chronicle, and blogs daily (almost) at [www.foodpolitics.com](http://www.foodpolitics.com) and for The Atlantic.

Alex: Hi everyone, welcome back. I'm Alex Jamieson for a very special interview here for the *Super Size Me: 10-Year Anniversary* summit. We're going to fix food with Marion Nestle today. Marion Nestle might be the most popular nutrition professor in America. If you haven't seen her books, her latest *Eat Drink Vote* is fabulous, as well as *Food Politics*. Two really popular books about food, what we can do with it, what impact our food choices have on the food landscape.

We're going to talk about all these goodies, but first I want to talk with you about when Morgan first approached you with his idea to eat nothing but McDonald's for a month and came to interview you, do you remember what you thought of this idea?

Marion: I remember not remembering it. In fact, I have no memory of the interview whatsoever. I have no memory of meeting him. The first I heard of it was somebody said, "Marion, you're in a movie that won at Sundance."

Alex: You must do these interviews every day.

Marion: I do a lot of them. I'm very nervous in front of a camera, although you might not know that. But I'm very nervous in front of a camera, and so the only way that I can deal with the anxiety about being in front of a camera is by just not thinking about it.

I remember some people came to my office. When I saw the interview on camera I said, "Oh yeah, I remember it. That was in my old office." There I was. I vaguely remember, but other than that I have no memory of it at all.

I went to see the movie at the showing that they had for the people who were in it, and I was stunned. By that time I had heard about it because it won at Sundance. Also, my former doctoral student Lisa Young, who was in the movie, had told me quite a bit about it. But I was seeing it for the first time, and was really stunned at how anybody could pull a trick like that. Pull it off, survive and be so funny at the same time. I thought it was a terrific movie.

Alex: That's great. You have been working here at NYU for...

Marion: Twenty-five years now.

Alex: Twenty-five years, in the nutrition department. I'm curious. What brought you to nutrition in the first place? Why was this your area of passion?

Marion: I love to eat. That really was the basis for it. When I went to college there were two choices for someone who was interested in food. You could major in dietetics or you could major in agriculture. I'm a city girl. We don't do agriculture. Or we didn't in those days. We do now, but we didn't do it then. So that was out of the question.

I was a dietetics major at Berkeley for one day. Then when I realized how much chemistry you had to take, I said if I have to take all that chemistry I was going to be a science major.

Alex: Okay, I like it.

Marion: It took a long time to get back to it. I got back to it when I was teaching cell and molecular biology at an undergraduate college. I was given a nutrition class to teach, and it was like falling in love. It was food at last, at long last food. I never looked back.

Alex: You never got into growing food?

Marion: Oh yes. Of course I grow food. I grow food on my terrace in Manhattan. I grow food at my place up in Ithaca.

Alex: Very cool, okay. Good. We're going to talk about that a bit more. I'm curious. When the film came out it made a splash. People got interested. It had an impact in some ways. What's been going on in the last ten years with food and health in America, in the Northern Hemisphere? What's been going on?

Marion: I would say it's been class divided. So that wealthier, more educated people are eating more healthfully. Millions of young people are interested in food issues. We see this at universities. When we started our food studies program at NYU we were basically it on food studies. Now every university in the country is teaching students about food because everybody's figured out it's a great way to teach and that students love it.

There's this enormous population of young people who are part of the food movement and want food that's healthier for people and for the planet. Then there's the large mass of Americans who don't have education and don't have access to healthy food, and who do have access to plenty of marketing of junk foods and think that that's what's normal to eat and are not healthy.

So we now see that obesity is a much greater problem among the poor than it is among the wealthy. These are people who have everything going against them. They don't have housing. They don't have transportation. They don't have good schools. They don't have healthcare. They don't have nice stores in their neighborhoods. So it's a class divide.

Alex: How do we fix a class-based social and health problem like this? What can the people who are watching this hope to do to influence it?

Marion: You vote with your fork, which means every time you make a decision what you eat you vote for the kind of food system that you want and you buy the kind of food that you believe in.

That's something that every individual can do. If every individual who held these kinds of belief systems bought a little locally grown, seasonal farmers market CSA-driven food the producers of foods for those programs would do much better. It would increase the size of the market for healthier, local, sustainable organic food. That would be very good.

Then you have to vote with your vote. What that means is getting involved in food politics, which means joining organizations that are working on these issues and trying to fix things locally. You might as well start local. Washington's much harder these days. So you start local.

But enormous gains have been made in school food. School food used to be a nightmare. It's still a nightmare in a lot of places, but it's also a lot better in a lot of places. That's a relatively easy local place to start that makes a big different in kids' lives.

Alex: Let's go back and talk about CSAs for a minute. Can you explain what a CSA is? It seems like this really has exploded in the last ten years.

Marion: A CSA is community supported agriculture. What that means is that you pay upfront and you give money to a farmer who you buy shares in what that farmer's produce is. It's a little risky. If the farmer has a bad year you don't get much. If the farmer has a good year you're overloaded and don't know what to do with it all.

Then every week, or however it works out, every week or two you get a box or a bag of whatever is produced by that farm. The farmer makes a living and you get a market basket of goods. The concept has extended to other kinds of food. I belong to a bread CSA up in Ithaca, for example.

Alex: How nice.

Marion: Yeah, the bread's wonderful.

Alex: Perfect segue. Let's talk about bread.

Marion: Let's talk about bread. I love bread.

Alex: I love bread. There is this idea that—some people believe that bread is dead, bread is evil, wheat is evil, it's causing all of our health problems, it's the root of all of our health concerns.

Everyone is testing themselves or just experimenting with a gluten-free diet. They think they might be celiac or have wheat intolerance. Is this something that is just a fad? Are people getting better testing? What is going on with gluten?

Marion: Let's start with the real problem, which is celiac disease which is caused by a component of wheat that the human body doesn't digest very well. In fact, it digests it in a way that forms a piece of protein that's toxic and messes up the digestive tract. So if you have celiac disease you have to be really, really careful not to eat anything with wheat in it.

About seven or eight years ago, doctors introduced a new testing method for celiac disease, and for the first time it was possible to really diagnose this in a scientifically verifiable way. When that started the testing confirmed what had long been believed, which is that 1 out of every 133 people has diagnosable celiac disease.

Once it was diagnosed lots of people who have symptoms that are similar to the symptoms of celiac disease, and they're very common symptoms, thought they had celiac disease whether they did or not.

The diagnosis itself is unpleasant and expensive and involves an intestinal biopsy, which is not much fun. People self-diagnosed and said I must have gluten intolerance and I'll just go on a gluten-free diet. They feel better. So that confirms that they must have a gluten problem. Fine, if they feel better don't eat gluten. You don't have to. It's not an essential nutrient. Wheat's not essential in the diet.

But for people that don't have problems with it—I don't know, I like bread a lot. It would be something I would have a hard time giving up.

Alex: What about the quality of bread? It sounds like you get incredible fresh, maybe even locally produced wheat.

Marion: It's locally produced wheat, locally milled wheat and organically grown. It's fabulous wheat and it's fabulous bread. The guy's a good baker.

Alex: Is that important to you, organic versus conventional? Or are there certain things that you focus on buying organically?

Marion: I care very much about how food is produced. I'm in a position

where it's just me, and I don't eat very much anymore. I might as well buy good food. I don't need to save a few dollars on food. I'm very fortunate and privileged in that way. So I want good bread. I live in lower Manhattan where good bread is everywhere. Then up in Ithaca we have Wide Awake Bakery. So there you are.

Alex: Little plug for Wide Awake Bakery.

Marion: A little plug for Wide Awake Bakery. It's really good. Hi, Stefan.

Alex: There's another idea that I feel like is being debunked, which is calories. Calories seem to be a very hot button issue. The functional medicine world right now people are like don't bother about counting calories. It's really about the quality of food. But for the last 40+ years we have been taught to count the calories, see how many of this you're eating. What's your take on calories? Do they matter?

Marion: Can I do another plug?

Alex: Yeah.

Marion: Let me do another plug.

Alex: Okay, great.

Marion: *Why Calories Count*. That's last year's book. This book does not advise counting calories. I would never advise anyone to bother because you can't do it accurately. It's really not possible to do it accurately, so you might as well just enjoy what you're eating.

My philosophy of eating is you should eat what you like and enjoy what you're eating always. If you're worried about weight, you weigh yourself on the scale. If your weight is going up you're eating too much, and if it's going down you're not eating enough. If it's staying the same over a week or a month, or whatever, then you're doing just fine. Don't worry about it. Relax. Enjoy your food. Food is so delicious. That's really the philosophy of this book.

Alex: Okay, so calories do count?

Marion: Calories count a lot if you're worried about weight. It really doesn't matter, I believe, where the calories come from. There's quite a lot of evidence that shows that weight is dependent on calories.

But if you're worried about your health, where the calories come

from matters a lot. You want to be eating healthier foods, which means fruits and vegetables. Make sure you have plenty of fruits and vegetables in your diet. Balance calories so you're not gaining weight. Don't eat a lot of junk food. If you drink sodas, don't drink much. That's really all.

Alex: That's it. It sounds so easy.

Marion: It is.

Alex: Why is it so confusing? There are so many opinions about what we're supposed to eat, what we shouldn't eat, when we should eat, how we should be while we're eating. People may actually leave this series more confused than when they started.

Marion: I hope not. I think dietary advice is very simple. Really, very simple. If you're worried about weight you balance calories, and you know that you're balancing calories if your weight isn't changing. Get a scale, step on it every once in awhile. That's really all you need to do about weight.

Then as far as health goes the rules are eat less, eat better, move more, don't eat too much junk food. Eating better means making sure you have vegetables in your diet and some plant foods. Relax. There are lots and lots of diets that have made civilization continue. People have survived for thousands of years eating very, very different kinds of diets based on what was available and what they could get.

The healthiest diets in the world are the classic Japanese diet or the classic Mediterranean diet. They're very, very different. They're really different, and yet they both work. They have it in common that they balance calories, they have plenty of vegetables and they don't have a lot of junk food.

Alex: I've met people who have healed and reversed their diabetes, their cancer, their MS with a vegan diet or a completely paleo diet, heavy on the meat but lots of vegetables or absolutely no meat and heavy on the vegetables. It seems like there are plenty of healing diets that work for most human beings.

Marion: We know it's not good. We know that drinking a lot of soda and sugary drinks and eating a lot of junk food isn't good for you. It doesn't mean you can't ever eat those things. It just means they have a little place in the diet, not a big place in the diet.

Alex: You were talking before about the worried wealth, about the people who are focusing a lot of attention on what they should be eating. Do you feel like the education programs aren't reaching the right audience?

Marion: They're definitely not. I'm not worried about people who are educated and have money to have choices about food. I'm worried about poor people who don't have access to food, who don't have healthcare, who have lousy schools in their neighborhood, who don't have nice groceries around and who can't get to nice groceries and don't have time to cook anyway. That's who I'm really worried about. Like I said, this is a class issue.

For the healthy and reasonably well off educated people, I wish everybody could just relax and enjoy their food and have a healthier relationship with food and not feel like food is their enemy. It makes me very, very sad to talk to people who feel like food is their enemy. They are always pushing it away and worrying about what it's doing, when they could be having so much fun with it.

Alex: Is that integrated at all in a nutrition program, like you have here at NYU, the relationship between enjoying food and eating healthfully? How do we educate people?

Marion: I certainly hope we do, but this is a nutrition program and we attract a lot of students who are very, very worried about these issues and really want to be able to tell people what to eat and what not to eat. We hope that through the course of the classes they have to take here that they'll learn to have a healthier relationship with food that maybe they came in with, but whether it works or not, I can't say.

Alex: Sometimes I wonder if—we don't have regular cable at home. We have a subscription service, so you can skip most of the commercials. I wonder, what kind of impact does that still have on people, how much marketing they get?

Marion: An enormous amount, especially on children. An enormous impact. As more and more of the effects of marketing on kids has been studied, and there are lots and lots of people studying now. They're counting up the number of commercials that kids are exposed to. They're counting up the number of commercials that adults are exposed to.

You're not supposed to recognize commercials as selling you

something. You're supposed to see commercials as fun entertainment, celebrity sports figures, whatever. You're not supposed to be thinking about what those messages are about. The way that the marketers put it, it's supposed to slip below the radar of critical thinking. People have no idea what the effect of those marketing messages is on their choices or on the way they think about these things.

I just read a study today that looked at the effect of celebrities on children's choices. First they tested the kids to find out whether the celebrities made them want to drink. Like Beyonce and Pepsi-Cola, that kind of thing, whether Beyonce made them want to drink Pepsi-Cola. A very, very large percentage of the kids said yes.

Then they talked to the kids about what the marketing message was about and why the companies were doing this, and whether Pepsi was healthy for you in large quantities and what was Beyonce's role in that. By the end of it the kids were pretty sophisticated about how much money Beyonce made, the \$50 million deal that she got for working for Pepsi-Cola. They quickly learned.

I think you can teach kids about these things, if anybody is doing what's called media literacy with them. But no, these commercials have an enormous effect. That's why they do them. Kids are a great market. Even though they don't have a lot of money themselves, they have tremendous influence on what the family buys. They have a little money, and a little money across a large number of kids adds up.

Alex: Right, all those allowances.

Marion: All those allowances, right, and the pestering of the parents. Even more than that, what advertising is designed to do is to teach kids that these are the foods that they're supposed to be eating. Their parents really don't understand what kids are supposed to be eating. They're not supposed to be eating what their parents eat.

They're supposed to be eating foods that are advertised on television, come with cartoons, have celebrity and sports figures endorsing them. They know more about what they're supposed to eat than their parents do. That's really subversive of parental authority around food. I think it's wrong and unethical.

Alex: My mother told us when we were kids, "If you ask me to buy you any food on television, you won't get it." She stuck to it.

Marion: Good for her. It's very hard for parents to stick to it. Very, very difficult. They just get tired of being nagged, and the marketers know that.

Alex: They must not have children. Or maybe they do.

Marion: Or they do. They do.

Alex: You talk about the population that really needs more access, more education. What organizations maybe are doing the work to help those populations, or what organizations could we help support that are doing that outreach on the ground, getting out there into communities?

Marion: I actually don't know any food movement organization that doesn't have that as a very high priority. Whether they're effective or not is another matter, because they are trying to work in an arena of society in which there's enormous income and equity.

This is a very difficult problem to solve, but here are lots and lots of groups that are working in inner city areas, both in cities and in rural areas, to try to get healthier food to poor people. The farmer's market movement, for example, has been very effective.

Alex: So the organizations that are really doing the work are everywhere.

Marion: They're everywhere. They're in every city, every town. Even the government has some pilot projects in trying to make it easier for people who are on food stamps to get fruits and vegetables. Everybody is trying to figure out ways to do this.

Of course, Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign to end childhood obesity within a generation was very deeply focused on schools and on inner city areas. I thought that was good, around access to healthier foods. There are lots of organizations doing this, lots of places to work. All you have to do is Google "food advocacy" and up they pop wherever you are.

Alex: Okay, good. I have an idea for this series. We have done some good work. All these people that I'm interviewing, *Super Size Me*, it did a good job of getting this idea out there that we need to change how we're behaving. There's still work to be done. Really there is an overarching theme that we can fix food, fix more of our own food from scratch, fix our relationship with food and fix the food environment that we live in.

We've talked about voting with your dollars, voting with your fork. That's kind of fixing the food environment. You've been fixing some of your own food. You grow some of your own food at your house, at your apartment.

Marion: Oh I do, yeah.

Alex: You love to cook. What are some of the most basic first steps that people can take towards either fixing their relationship with food or fixing more of their own food?

Marion: Teach kids to cook. That's the first thing, the absolute first thing. Teach kids to cook. It will totally change their relationship with food. Teach them where food comes from. The whole business about school gardens and Alice Waters' work really makes sense to me, and I've seen it in action. I've seen the affect that it has on kids. Kids love it. The adults love it too. It's really fun to grow your own food. Even if it's just radishes in a pot on the windowsill, kids love it.

I'm lucky enough in Manhattan to have a terrace. I grow salads on my terrace. Then I have this amazing blueberry bush that I've had up there for six years. It's very productive and makes delicious blueberries.

Alex: So teaching kids to cook.

Marion: Teach kids to cook.

Alex: That's a great suggestion. It's fun and it passes along the enthusiasm.

Marion: It passes along culture in a really important way. Not every kid is going to like it, but a lot of them will. Even just basic cooking skills, making eggs for example or making salads or putting together a salad dressing or whatever. Give them some knife skills. Better than other kinds of dangerous play. You can give little kids knives. They learn pretty quickly to keep their fingers away from the blade.

Alex: They do. I've got my almost seven-year-old up there with me at the counter.

Marion: Great.

Alex: Yeah, it's really fun. He loves playing with knives.

This has been great. Is there any last point that you want to make or encouragement that you want to offer to people who are watching this about what they can do?

Marion: Oh yeah. I'm enormously optimistic about the role that food plays in society, and how people can get involved in food issues and really make positive change in a very satisfying way. I think if you need immediate gratification you start at the local level, because you can make things happen at the local level that are tremendously exciting and that will make a very big difference in peoples' lives.

You can start with your own. Start growing a little tiny bit of your own food. Teach your kids how to cook. Take your kids out to a garden and show them that radishes grow in the ground, these things really come out of the ground, apples grow on trees, whatever. You're making a big different in kids' lives.

Alex: That's great.

Marion: You may as well start with kids. It works better that way.

Alex: Absolutely. They're so fun to eat with. We all want to play more with our food, don't we?

Marion: Play with your food.

Alex: This has been an interview with Marion Nestle. Again, this is her latest book, *Eat Drink Vote*.

Marion: It has cartoons.

Alex: It does. Look at this. Illustrations. Everyone's going to love this. Get it for the whole family. Thank you so much for your time. It's been great.

Marion: My pleasure.