

7 reasons why examining your diet is a great New Year's resolution

The dawn of a new year is a great time to reflect on our lives in hopes of making them more satisfying and meaningful. Since a large component of my research over the past six months has focused on food production and diet, this seems as good a place as any from which to draw inspiration. Additionally, since eating food is one of the most important activities that we engage in (in terms of personal as well as planetary health), we owe it to ourselves to scrutinize carefully that which we consume. The following seven reasons provide a foundation for understanding why we need to take our eating habits very seriously and, more particularly, why we should begin revamping our diets forthwith. (Two caveats before beginning, however: 1) A full essay could focus on any one of the following reasons. As I continue my research, I hope to dedicate future columns to a more detailed look at some of them.; 2) Since many people take what they eat very personally, it is always difficult to make suggestions without sounding overly critical and even self-righteous. Please recognize that the author grapples with the ramifications of these revelations every day—something quite evident from his expanding waistline.)

Reason 1: Improve your health and increase your longevity. Trite as it may sound, "You eat to live" (Willett). Therefore, what you eat obviously impacts your well-being decisively. While there is no absolute best diet for all people, there are certain dietary behaviors that aren't conducive to health and longevity. For starters, eating too much isn't healthy. About one-third of us (in the U.S.) are obese and many more are overweight; technically, obese means having a BMI, body mass index, of 30 or more. The proportion of us that are obese has more than doubled since the 1960s (Willett). (To find out more about BMI or to calculate your personal BMI, go to: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/) According to the Center for Disease Control, as a direct consequence of our collective fatness, nearly 300,000 of us die each year and the annual health care costs associated with obesity is (an amazing) ~\$240 billion (Schlosser; an amount that doesn't include all the money that people spend in an effort to lose weight). Clearly, our habit of eating too much is taking its toll on us in a very big way.

Not only are we eating too much food, but, in particular, we are eating too much food that is detrimental to our health. For example, while soda provides nearly no nutritional benefit and huge amounts of calories and sugar (two things we definitely do not need more of), our demand for such beverages keeps going up. Consider that in 1970 regular (i.e., excluding diet) soft drink consumption (actually, availability, but this is expected to track similarly to consumption) was 22.2 gallons per person per year. In 1997, it leapfrogged to 41.4 gallons per person, amounting to an 86 percent increase! Meanwhile, per capita diet soda consumption increased (550 percent!) and per capita juice consumption increased 61 percent (Nestle). No wonder we are getting so much fatter and, remember, we have now only looked at one component of our diets.

Other foods we should avoid or significantly reduce from our diets include processed foods and foods with moderate levels of saturated or trans fats. Processed foods (which include white rice, white bread, and most commercial crackers, cookies, and

cakes) are problematic in large part because they cause rapid spikes in blood sugar and insulin (something which can, over time, trigger the onset of diabetes). They also digest rapidly which results in a feeling of hunger returning much earlier than with other foods. It is better to eat brown rice, bread, and homemade baked goods that contain whole grains (rather than refined ones). Significant amounts of saturated fats, which drive up blood cholesterol and therefore are associated with coronary heart disease and heart attacks, can be found in whole milk, butter, cheese, red meat, chocolate, and coconut products. Trans fats, a human invention which serve to increase the shelf life of foods, have a completely negative impact on the body (particularly by raising LDL cholesterol levels) and can be found in margarines, deep-fried fast foods, most commercial baked goods, and anything that says it contains "partially hydrogenated" oils.

In short, the best thing you can do for your health in the next year is to eat less and increase your relative consumption of fruits and vegetables meanwhile reducing your intake of the potentially dangerous foods listed above. (Lastly, to those that think you need to eat meat to obtain sufficient protein, this is just a myth perpetuated by propaganda. A diverse diet that contains adequate amounts of nuts, beans and vegetables will provide you with more than a sufficient amount of protein. Additionally, excess protein in the diet in the long term causes bones to become brittle because protein draws out calcium from the bones in order to neutralize acids formed during digestion (Willett).)

Reason 2: Improve the health of children. By improving your diet, you will undoubtedly improve your children's as well. Not only will they more likely eat what you put in the cupboard or on the table, but if you yourself eat healthy foods and exhibit healthy food habits, they are much more likely to develop an affection for healthy foods which is something that will serve them very well during their lifetime.

It is so important that parents and relatives do what they can to promote good food in our children because so many other forces are working against this practice. Many food companies are doing their best to flood the minds of our children with the notion that only food that is sugary, salty, caffeinated, artificially-colorful, branded (rather than generic), wrapped in flashy packaging, and/or processed is worthy of eating. Worse yet, many public school systems have forfeited control our children's health to "junk food" dealers—either to make up for lost federal and state funding or due to sheer negligence. In any case, we cannot expect our schools to provide meals that are healthy or sustainable. Yet we can guarantee that some powerful companies will fill televisions, radios, magazines, and billboards with messages that draw our children to adopt attachments to unhealthy and, some might say, dangerous, foods and eating behaviors. The current epidemic of childhood obesity is a prime indicator of how vulnerable our children are and how successful the mainstream food companies have been. It also suggests that our collective negligence on this matter is in need of a critical reexamination.

There is one last area that cannot be overlooked. Future mothers should realize that the breast milk that they will one day feed their offspring will contain toxins that they have ingested over the course of their



lifetime. Unfortunately, physiologically, breasts have a tendency to store materials like pesticides, PCBs, dioxins, and heavy metals that women ingest or are otherwise exposed to. The cumulative load of these materials (which make its way out of the breasts into the bodies of breast-feeding babies) causes short-term as well as long-term damage. Thus, future mothers should avoid foods that are suspected to contain elevated levels of these toxins (for example, to reduce one's exposure to mercury, people should greatly reduce intake of such foods as white tuna, king mackerel, and swordfish) and avoid contact with home and garden pesticides and insecticides as well. Yet, finally, and emphatically, it is still unquestionably better for mothers to breast feed babies for at least the first six months of their lives since breast milk contains essential nutrients that formulas and vitamins cannot replace, something that outweighs any of its negative impacts.

Reason 3: Promote "food for all" as a value. The planet's human population can be broken into three groups of people on the basis of their food intake—those that eat too much, those that eat properly, and those that don't get enough (calories and protein). The majority of us in the United States fall into the first category while at least 1,100,000,000 of our global neighbors (and not-so-distant relatives) fall into the third. The reason so many go underfed isn't because there isn't enough food produced in the world. Global hunger and malnourishment occurs largely because the food that is produced is either consumed in excess by a minority (at a higher price) or goes to feed domesticated animals (which then is fed to the minority as well). Thus, if more of us bought and consumed less food, there would be more food to go around, since less would be "wasted" on commodified (and often "incarcerated") animals or our guts, dewlaps, or love handles. Additionally, those that reduced intake would have newly created financial resources which could be used to get food to those much more unfortunate (and no less deserving). To all the cynics out there, consider this. Assuming you spend \$100 a month on food and you reduce your consumption by 10 percent, then you have \$10 left over to support organizations (like Oxfam (www.oxfam.org) or Freedom from Hunger (www.freedomfromhunger.org)) which support other humans in their quest to obtain sufficient food to live. If only 10 percent of us made this seemingly miniscule sacrifice, collectively we would have \$3 billion to give away as charity. Doesn't this seem likely to do wonders to decrease human

misery (and, indirectly, promote hope and peace globally)? And while I encourage all of us to support food acquisition efforts on a global basis, let's not fool ourselves to think that we don't have hunger right here in our neighborhoods. Statewide we have the following organizations which continue to aid our immediate neighbors in their quest for food: Central Illinois Foodbank (217.522.4022); Heart of Illinois Harvest (309.693.1400); Peoria Area Food Bank (309.671.3906); River Bend Food Bank (309.764.7434); and The Greater Chicago Food Depository (773.843.6702; www.chicagosfoodbank.org). Please consider contributing to these efforts in any way possible.

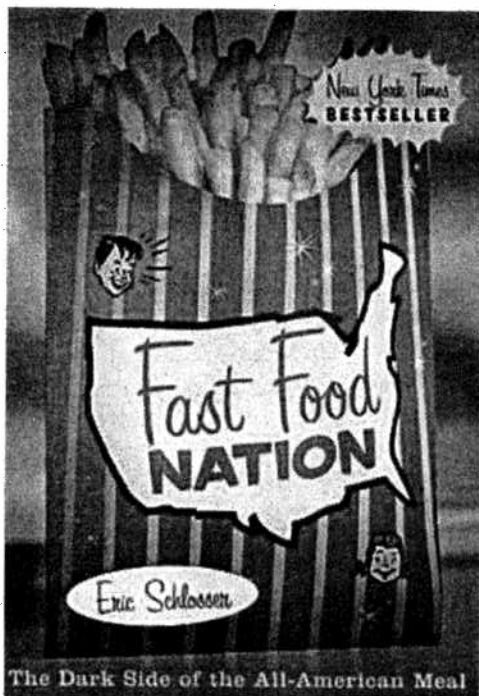
Reason 4: Support humane and moral companies. Unfortunately, many food-centered corporations suffer from the same disease that other corporations suffer from. That is, they put the profits of their shareholders ahead of the health interests of the consumers. Shockingly, as described by Marion Nestle in *Food Politics* and Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation*, many food companies are akin to tobacco companies in terms of the duplicity with which they conduct business (i.e., cajoling unwitting consumers to buy substances that can be dangerous to their health). The tactics used are too numerous to elucidate here but include, among other things, manipulating government officials and laws to guarantee a market favorable to the overproduction and (therefore necessary) overconsumption of their unhealthy products. Upon the realization of these highly questionable practices, one might be prompted to try to avoid products from these companies and, alternatively, support companies that haven't been so manipulative. In practice, this means buying organic foods, meats from free range and non-chemicalized animals, and whole grains. Unfortunately, since the economies of scale dictate that unhealthy foods are sometimes less expensive than healthier options, many low income families sense that they don't have the luxury to buy healthy foods for themselves. However, those of us who support the healthy food companies (and, indirectly the farmers that provide for them) help drive down the costs of these foods as well as encourage grocers to carry more of these items. If government subsidies supported organic and wholesome foods more readily (at least to the same extent that they support unhealthy foods), everyone would be better off and the economically disadvantaged among us wouldn't be economically-driven to eat poorly. One place to obtain foods from companies that have their clientele's health in focus when they manufacture products is through food co-ops; others ways include: grocers that specialize in healthy foods (like Cornucopia), farmers markets (during the summer and fall), and self-grown garden foods. Fortunately, we have a co-op in Galesburg, and if anyone is interested in it, please contact me via email and I will get you in touch with the relevant parties.

Reason 5: Reject modern forms of food commercialization. With all the gluttonous consumption going on, one has to wonder why we do this to ourselves. The recent climb in obesity rates suggests that genetic factors are not to blame. Our lack of exercise (driven largely by our increasingly sedentary lifestyles and jobs) must account for some of it. However, as suggested by the soda statistics presented earlier, we are still eating more and more (ironically) during a period

when we actually need less. So, what might be the culprit then? One only need watch TV or read mainstream newspapers and magazines to get a pretty good idea. We are flooded with messages that tell us that consuming food is a sign of power, prestige, happiness, and freedom. These images and messages affect us in a significant way; simply, the food industry doesn't spend billions of dollars on advertising because it is a losing proposition. According to Steven Gortmaker, a professor in the Harvard School of Public Health, "The best single behavioral predictor of obesity in children and adults is the amount of television viewing." And, most surprising, Gortmaker and his colleagues' research shows that two-thirds of the influence of TV on obesity is tied to "the effect of advertising in changing what you eat" (in Lambert). And since most foods advertised on TV aren't conducive to a healthy diet, TV commercials push us to eat more foods of the unhealthy variety. Also, food companies, who do extension research, have been able to determine what "the exact levels of sweetness and saltiness [are] that will make every food as attractive as possible" (Gortmaker in Lambert). So, the big companies also know how to manipulate our palates in ways that, once again, aren't in the best interests of our health. Therefore, to the extent that we buy the products that are shoved into our eyes, ears, brains, and (literally) down our throats, we perpetuate the system. Thus, by consciously rebelling against the messages with which we are deluged, we can support foods and companies that are more likely to be healthy to us and to our neighbors. Perhaps, if consumers were more aware and conscious of the level of manipulation to which they are regularly exposed, they might unite and, by virtue of their new purchasing habits, make healthy food eating the new epidemic sweeping the nation.

Reason 6: Help move society towards sustainability. As the world's nations become more affluent and global population continues to increase (albeit at much slower rates than just a few decades ago), it is not surprising to find that demands for food, and in particular meat, expand as well. Yet, while there is enough food being grown right now to feed everyone with a healthy diet, if global diets become similar to ours in the U.S., as is occurring in many places due to globalization, land and ocean pressures will only become more severe. Currently, many ocean fisheries are seeing greatly decreased production and our nation's midsection is witnessing dramatic aquifer reductions and soil erosion. Standard responses to these trends include: (1) the expansion of genetically-modified crops (GMOs); (2) the use of heavier loads of pesticides and fertilizers; and, (3) the increase of irrigation withdrawals. Unfortunately, none of these responses is sustainable (or, in the case of (1), without significant, largely unexamined risks). Fortunately, there are responses that are sustainable. These include: (1) minimizing excessive consumption of foods; (2) reducing consumption of meat and fish (since they provide many calories and nutrients that can be obtained much more efficiently through other foods); (3) educating people how to eat more healthily (and providing them the means to do so); (4) expanding use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques on farms; and, (5) exporting self-sustaining, organic food production techniques to the poorest nations (rather than just food during emergencies). And since each of these four proposals are encouraged and promoted when we eat healthy foods, we have ever more reason to do so.

Reason 7: Serve as role models for positive change. Since food consumption accounts for 10-20 percent of our environmental impact (Worldwatch) and given the extravagant costs to our society



associated with poor diets (including heart disease, type II diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure, etc.), isn't it about time that we reconceptualize our relationship with our food? I strongly believe that through our diets we promote particular causes. Our choice of the foods we consume is an inherently political act. With every food we buy, we either support the fast-food industry or the slow food (locally-grown, locally-cooked) community. With everything we drink, we either support the soda pop industries (through canned or bottled soda or water), the milk or juice industries, or local public water facilities. With every food we eat, we either support intensive farming with its heaving loads of pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, and genetically-modified organisms, or we support organically-grown, naturally-derived, and sustainable farming technologies. Thus, every time you buy food or eat food in the presence of other people, you are sending a message about what you care about and what type of world you want to live in. Help send a positive message and one that we can all live with.

Something other than the status quo is viable now and the movement towards better diets and healthy foods needs leaders like you to take the plunge. What do you have to lose? Perhaps high blood pressure, excess poundage, toxins in your blood, and gargantuan farms owned by multinational firms who put profit over health nearly every time. Good riddance, right? What do you have to gain? A world where people's health come ahead of profits, where delicious, healthy foods that are grown locally (or, at least, organically), and where children have every reason to think that they have been provided for in the best way adults know how.

So what was that I heard you say? Something about a New Years resolution? Wonderful.

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BACKTRACKING

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Galesburg's Glenwood Ice Company

Prior to the invention of the home refrigerator, the refrigerated rail car, and commercial refrigeration, ice harvesting from ponds and lakes was big business. Large blocks of ice were sawn from nearby ponds and lakes by hand. The blocks were floated to a loading point and placed on wagons for the haul to the ice house. In the ice house, the ice blocks were placed in sawdust (cheap form of readily available insulation) and stored for the hot days of summer. It was hard work in the winter. It was also hard work in the summer to remove the ice, cut it to size, and to deliver it to the customer to be placed in the ice box or the rail shipping car.

Galesburg had the Glenwood Ice Company that performed the above duty. One of the sources for the ice was old Lake George. One of the employees involved in the harvesting and loading of ice was one of Galesburg's successful sons, Carl Sandburg. Carl recalls about the hard job in his autobiography, *Always the Young Strangers* (1952). Sandburg spent cold January nights at Lake George, east of town. He was, for a while, a "floaters" — riding and pushing cut ice toward the chutes at the ice house. He later worked in the ice house, moving the ice about and spreading saw dust to act as an insulator. Sandburg was cutting ice for Galesburg's Glenwood Ice Company. It would later fall to the invention of "Artificial Ice" made by the Galesburg Artificial Ice Company, but not yet. At midnight, Sandburg would sit on the porch of the Soangetaha Club House. He would eat whatever was in his paper bag. Often it was a pork-chop and bacon sandwich or roast beef with pickles. There were also a doughnut and a small bottle of coffee. His mother packed these midnight lunches. And Sandburg ate them near the threshold of success, on the Soangetaha Club House porch.

The ice harvesting from Lake George helped to keep Galesburg a little cooler in the summer. Sandburg worked one January, harvesting the ice in zero to about 15-degree weather. He walked from his home to the streetcar that would take him to Lake George. He worked the night crew from 7 PM until 6 AM, with an hour off at midnight. He was a "floaters" at first. This meant that he rode the cut blocks of ice that were about 15 feet long, 10 feet wide and about a foot and a half thick. Using a pole, he would direct the floating block of ice to the chutes at the icehouse. Here the raft would be cut up into smaller blocks and loaded up a belt to be stored, with sawdust, for summer's needs. He graduated from being a floaters to working in the icehouse. In the icehouse, his job was to muscle the frozen Lake George water into proper storage locations. Sandburg remembered the foreman of the ice house who kindly encouraged him to do the work, and called him by his name, saying, "Better slide into it, Sandburg." He remembered the respect paid by the foreman to a young Swedish lad. He would remember it forever.

On the hot summer days, ice was removed from storage and placed in the horse



John Robson

drawn wagons that prominently displayed the name of the company. There was no doubt what was for sale. Ice was as much of a requirement on a hot summer day as electricity is to us now. Without it, milk, meat, and similar perishable foods would not last long in the ice box.

In time, the "natural ice" harvested from local lakes and ponds would be replaced by "artificial ice" with the availability of electricity to larger commercial operations, but before it was common in homes. The ability to make ice from water using refrigeration units eliminated the winter harvesting of ice. It eliminated a seasonal winter work when many farmers and farm hands were looking for a source of income.

The Glenwood Ice Company's president was John Robson. He was also a stockholder in the Galesburg National Bank. Mr. Robson was born in Whittington, Northumberland County, England, March 5, 1827. He came to Knox County in 1850 and became a farmer. From farming, he expanded his interests and influence.

The Secretary of the Glenwood Ice Company was Ira Callender. Ira was born in Peoria in 1857. By 1884, he had settled in Galesburg and started in the ice business.

No longer would we think of using "natural ice" to cool our drinks. No longer do we think of "synthetic ice" as ice made by refrigeration. It's just ice. Now we open the freezer, or perhaps just push a lever and the ice fills our glass at the door of the refrigerator. We are a long way from Lake George, but not so really very long in time.

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