

Do you really want to eat that?

A closer look at our food industry

For my end of the year essay (in December 2005), I encouraged people to examine their diets and provided a list of reasons why this might be a worthwhile endeavor. Given the breadth of my focus then, the essay served as a cursory introduction to the key considerations involved. Here I focus in much more depth on one of these reasons—one surrounding the heavy commercialization of food. I dedicate this time to the topic of food and diet for two reasons: (1) All of us could benefit from a different diet (perhaps in ways that we don't yet realize); and, (2) Our diets are one of the more important and far-reaching activities in which we engage—economically, ecologically, and personally.

In my earlier essay, reason #5 urged readers to "reject modern forms of food commercialization." Restated in simple terms, it suggests that we don't buy or eat foods that are widely advertised, heavily marketed, and widely distributed. I realize that this may sound absurd to many of you. Unfortunately, as absurd as it may seem, it is sound advice and the reasons are many. In fact, its apparent absurdity combined with its verity suggests a lack of awareness by the masses which makes the entire subject all the more intriguing. In this vein, I hope that this essay will provoke local farmers, food providers, and eaters to grapple publicly with its content. For much too long, we have collectively ignored much of what follows.

We shouldn't be eating heavily commercialized foods. The reasons are numerous and include: (1) the most widely advertised foods tend to be lacking in nutrients and full of damaging contents; (2) the advertisements themselves are manipulative and dangerous to our society, especially our children; (3) agribusiness has gained a major foothold in our political system; (4) people elsewhere in the world are following in our footsteps; and, (5) the multinational companies that are selling these highly advertised foods are engaged in unhealthy, inhumane, and immoral practices.

So let's start with probably the most contested part of the essay. Some foods aren't good for human consumption, in small quantities or in large quantities. (This may not sound controversial to some of you, but according to Nestle (2004) and others, the food industry has spent huge amounts of resources to "convince" government agencies that no food is "bad" for us.) Our supermarkets and convenience stores are full of these products. Food advertisements tend to center disproportionately on these same low (non-) nutritious foods. Our schools are full of them too—via vending machines, a la carte lines, and even Market Day products. Soda pop, chips, cupcakes, gum, candy, and a host of other things that many of us consume in mass quantities serve little if any good and most actually do harm to us.

Yet, it isn't just these obvious foods that should be on our "watch" list. There are many more that need to join it, especially in terms of ones doing harm to us. Most packaged foods in the U.S. suffer from one of the following health hazards: trans fat (a human invention, not found naturally), high levels of saturated fat, and high levels of salt or sugar. And given that all four of these substances are linked to heart disease (directly or via high blood pressure or obesity) and considering that heart disease is the #1 cause of death in the United States, one wonders why we are consuming these

dangerous foods and in such high quantities. It seems that the companies that provide these foods do because we don't seem to care or know better. It isn't that popcorn and pizza (or other packaged foods) have to be dangerous for us. Inherently they are not. It is because the manufacturers of food alter the foods to maximize their profits. They do this because it is cheaper to use dangerous (often artificial) compounds than to use healthy and natural ones. For instance, Celeste's frozen Vegetable Pizza contains 4.5 grams of both saturated fat and trans fat in each of its 6 ounce single-servings. Why so much trans fat? Well, rather than using real cheese, they use a "low-moisture part-skim mozzarella cheese substitute," which consists of... partially hydrogenated soybean oil" (Liebman). Microwavable popcorn, pot pies, fruit pies, frozen entrees, and crackers all tend to have much more saturated fat than they need to and most have loads of trans fat as well—something completely unnecessary yet lucrative to stock holders and CEOs.

The clearest example of how ridiculous the quality of our food has become is a recent comparative study done on the nutritional content of McDonald's and KFC products in various countries where they do business. The study, which appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine earlier this month, found that McDonald's and KFC foods differ greatly depending on which country they are served. For instance, McDonald's fries and KFC chicken generally have much higher levels of trans fat in the United States than a host of European countries included in the investigation. The study makes clear that the fast food companies could easily reduce key hazards in their items without changing their content noticeably. Not surprisingly, immediately after this news was released, McDonald's claimed that the differences observed are a function of local taste preferences. Apparently, we are supposed to believe this. Do you, especially when we know that partially hydrogenated oils (i.e., trans fats) are cheaper to produce? Denmark has banned trans fats from their foods. When are we in the U.S. going to be so wise and thoughtful about people's health?

Advertisements compel us to buy products. Some don't believe this. Fine, so be it. Outside of tons of research which demonstrates this unequivocally, common sense should be sufficient to demonstrate it as fact. Billions of dollars are spent to flood our minds with images, jingles, and associations (e.g., eat this and you will have friends, lovers, etc.). The key food marketers don't get extremely rich by making stupid economic decisions. A company now spends over \$80,000 per second to air their commercial during the Superbowl, and that doesn't even account for the cost of making the commercial in the first place. The company's that spend this loot tend to be some of the most successful in the world. Hence, one can conclude, advertising works. And unfortunately it works in insidious ways.

Kids are extremely vulnerable members of our species. They are also very impressionable. Advertisers know this. Thus, they bombard our airwaves with consumeristic messages, and many of these are directed towards our children. The tobacco industry was found to have done so (early smokers become lifelong ones), and the food industry does so as well. What do you think all the advertising in schools is about? What do you make of the very

aggressive attempts by the agribusiness to dictate what goes into the foods at all school lunches? (Public schools are coerced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture—via financial reimbursements—to use the surplus agricultural commodities). What do you make of the fact that more children can identify Ronald McDonald from a photo than can recognize the U.S. president or Jesus Christ?

Getting children to become consumers of specific products early on may not seem so problematic. Yet, research suggests that consumer behaviors learned early tend to replicate themselves in adulthood. Thus, when kids become accustomed to eating low nutrition foods and foods that are saturated in trans and saturated fats and sugars, they are much more likely to continue eating these products for the remainder of their lives. And given that incidence of childhood obesity has doubled (for children aged 6 to 11) and tripled (for children aged 12 to 19) in the past 25 years (American Obesity Association), it is pretty clear that we have a serious problem on our hands. And since childhood obesity is strongly associated with higher incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke in adulthood, our nation better be prepared for a very, very serious health crisis (as if we aren't in one already) in the next 30-40 years. So, simply, if we want to do something about this now, we have to start with the advertising of junk food with kids. We also need to get rid of easy access to these foods as well. Some school systems (and even states) are doing so. Arizona and Kentucky got rid of soda in school and nationally there is legislation that would continue this effort. Find out more at: www.childrenshub.org/campaign/school_food/

Not only are the junk foods detrimentally impacting our collective health, the food industry which promotes them so successfully is able to do so because they have gotten their people and their platforms firmly imbedded in the political system. It is this strong connection between the ideals of agribusiness and the laws (or lack thereof) of our land that presents us with the dilemma we face. Let's look at some of the evidence. Fed Up! is a documentary that outlines the multitude of government officials in high ranking government positions who were once major actors (or have since become ones) in corporations that dominate the food industry. This revolving door between the two sectors of our society should concern us immensely. All the way back to the early part of the 20th Century, food executives pushed for "eat more" campaigns. Early on, when many people in the U.S. weren't getting enough to eat (and suffering from the consequent health problems), perhaps this made sense. In contemporary America, it makes absolutely no sense, yet the government refuses to tell us to eat less of any particular food item, opting instead (as agribusiness would have it) to tell us to use components (such as sugar, fat, etc.) of food more sparingly. (Agribusiness's move to more processed foods is also a means to get us to eat more because processed foods, including white rice and pasta, digest very quickly and leave consumers of these foods with artificial hunger pains not long afterwards; hence, overeating commences.) The Food Pyramid which is our government's attempt to provide a guide for healthy consumption has gone through more revisions (due to capitulations



to industry) than you would ever imagine (covered in Nestle). The current pyramid represents a sheepish backing away from the hierarchical model issued in 1992 (which made clear that certain food groups—such as sweets, meats, and dairy products—were to be consumed in smaller quantities). Since this pyramid serves as the basis for many nutritional education programs, this is an additional problem for us, one with which agribusiness appears to be very pleased.

Agribusiness's power brokers have also tweaked the legal structures such that raw food commodities (such as, corn or soy beans) have not increased in value over time. Most of the money we spend on food goes not to the farmers but to everyone that comes along afterwards, let's call them the "processors." These processors manipulate the food (often by adding unhealthy components) so that they can sell it for more. Any product in a colorful box or tin and a catchy slogan (one repeated ad nauseam on TV) can sell for a lot more than a raw (unprocessed) commodity in bulk.

Additionally, the price of food is artificially kept low because low prices do motivate many people to buy products. (Consider that most of the time, newspaper advertisers cajole shoppers to buy their foods by stressing price and quantity—but not quality.) But since agribusiness thrives on economies of scale (i.e., sell more at the maximum profit margins that the market will bear), it is important that it shifts external costs to the consumers in not so obvious ways. They do so by hiding the true cost of the foods—in the form of ecological damage via pesticides, fertilizers, acidification of soils, etc. Our government (via our tax revenue) is responsible for dealing with these messes, not agribusiness. When governments ignore these problems, as we have witnessed in many instances in our country, then the humans and the surrounding life forms pay these extra costs by suffering from a reduction in quality of life. Agribusiness shifts the burden to us by convincing the government to subsidize large scale farming (which provides about half of farmer income these days). Thus, a good deal of our tax money is going to pay for industrialized food production. Agribusiness is also immune to the impacts to our health. We pay higher medical bills and higher medical insurance premiums when we consume their processed and unhealthy foods. Agribusiness doesn't pay when we develop heart disease or childhood diabetes, or for our medicines when we develop a host of other chronic ailments. Once again, they are insulated from the true cost of the product they produce. So, next time you see a great price

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A place to call home

Drop off news items at Lacy England Agency or email to lacyengland@grics.net

Knoxville of Illinois, A Place to Call Home was released Sunday at a reception sponsored by the City of Knoxville Terquasquicentennial Committee and hosted by members of the Knox County Historical Sites, Inc. in the Henry Knox Room of the Old Courthouse. The book of pen and ink drawings by artist David Alan Badger, featuring houses and buildings in Knoxville, received generally positive comments from the guests who viewed the completed project and were treated to cookies and punch in Knoxville's own historic courthouse. Copies of the book, in two sizes, as well as the original drawings, are available for purchase locally. Contact Historical Sites President Peg Bivens at Lacy England Agency. Individual prints of each drawing at \$25 each may also be ordered.

The project was sponsored by the City of Knoxville and participating businesses as part of the year-long celebration of the town's 175th. A sequel to the book, *Knoxville Through Five Generations*, which was published for the sesquicentennial, is in the works and will be released in November.

Flowering crab apple trees are attracting attention this spring. Recent rains and warm weather have greened things up around town and flowering shrubs are at their peak. Red buds, dogwoods, apple trees, and lilacs are all in bloom now. But the variety attracting the most notice is the flowering crab. Central Park to the east of the Old Courthouse boasts one of these trees which was planted as part of the beautification efforts the city undertook for the sesquicentennial celebration in 1981. The pink blossoms are particularly vibrant this year. Other specimens of flowering crab can be observed throughout town on terraces. These trees were given to residents through a program sponsored by Illinois Power Company to promote planting of tree varieties which would not interfere with overhead utility lines. Another early flowering tree, the magnolia, was at one-time a project of the Knoxville Senior Women's Club. Many of the homes in town sport this variety of tree due to this campaign.

The city council will be turning attention to sidewalks this year. Walking and bike-riding are popular pastimes in Knoxville, noticeably so once milder weather sets in. Early morning and evening both are prime times to observe townfolk strolling the streets and walks through town. The baby buggy brigade has been out in force with warm temperatures coming on early this season. A sure sign of spring is measured by the bike activity as kids cruise around town looking for each other. Let out from

under the thumb of parental chaffering after the long winter months they peddle through town with an air of abandon. The slower pace and quiet residential areas of a small town afford children freedom that cannot be granted in a larger community where traffic is a constant.

Knoxville's Foundation for Educational Excellence held their 7th annual fun-raiser auction last Saturday at the Knox County Fairgrounds. The event runs pretty smoothly and the volunteers have things down to a manageable routine. The committee headed up by Sharon Shreeves, works tirelessly all year soliciting donations as far away as the Carroll Shelby Foundation in California. Two items that remain popular year after year with buyers are the hand-crafted barn board birdhouses from Bob and Doris Foster and the spring plants from Scharfenberg's greenhouse, Homestead Growers. Classroom "baskets," a collection of items assembled around a theme and donated by the students and teachers in each class, also attract an array of interested bidders. "Principal for a Day" donated by Mable Woolsey principal Debra Galbreth had the elementary school teachers waving and shouting to get the attention of the auctioneer. A parent and student won the bid, however. Profits for the auction go to support the work of the foundation. Once their first project, the learning center/ kindergarten building addition at Mable Woolsey was completed, the foundation has turned their attention to augmenting programming. Those who missed the auction still have the opportunity to give by participating in the annual "Birdies for Charity" campaign, a matching charity tracked with the John Deere Classic golf tournament. The foundation, like all recognized charities, also welcomes direct contributions.

National Red Hat Day, April 25, another annual event, was celebrated locally in Galesburg. Knoxville red hatters joined women from west-central Illinois at two events this year. Saturday April 22 a spring fling was held at Bethel Baptist Church with fun and games and a box lunch for a roaring good time hosted by Galesburg area chapters. Wednesday April 25 was the second annual Party at the Pavilion, a luncheon at Lake Storey Pavilion hosted by Haw Creek Hatters of Gilson, followed by a trek to downtown Galesburg where the gals hooked up with another group of hatters who came by train from Marceline Mo. to celebrate the day. Over 150 women, all decked out in purple finery, topped by elaborate red hats, attended each gathering. The Red Hat Society, begun by accident in 1998 by Sue Ellen Cooper and five of her close friends, has become an international phenomenon and Knoxville women, including a chapter from the Knox County Nursing Home, are joining in the fun.

on a processed (non-nutritious) food item, remember that the true cost you are paying is not the one that shows up on the register at the checkout counter. Perhaps this will prompt you to reconsider the purchase.

Governmental co-optation by agribusiness also expresses itself in other ways. Manufacturers need not disclose the all the ingredients contained in their foods (due to proprietary laws). In the U.S., they don't also have to report if GMOs (genetically-modified organisms) are contained in the products (but they do in Europe). Thus, consumers are not able to make discriminating and educated choices about the foods they buy and eat. This is particularly troubling when very few scientific tests have been done on GMOs, and some early studies suggest that there may be serious problems with this form of "advanced" technology. A consumer is also not privy to the origin of the product. Literally, one might be eating grapes that have been grown in a heavily polluted part of the world and have no idea. All the above examples suggest that regulations are much too lax which strongly suggests overly close ties between government and industry. For more evidence of the collusion between big business and government in the area of food, be sure to check out Mattern's report which can be found on line at: www.citizen.org/documents/USDAInc.pdf

Things would be bad enough if only the 280+ million inhabitants of our country were heavily invested in processed and nutritionally-questionable foods. However, the other 96% of humanity is increasingly being exposed and hoodwinked into eating like the majority of us do here in the states. The fast food industry is growing by leaps and bounds overseas. In India, it is growing by (an enormous) 40% a year. As of 2004, China already had 800 KFCs and 100 Pizza Huts (GS). Bottled water consumption, a profound indicator of wasteful and inefficient consumption, is also increasing at alarming rates throughout Asia and elsewhere. Some boast about these trends saying they signify that people are getting richer and desiring the "American Way." Unfortunately however, accompanying these trends soon enough will be our obesity rates, our heart disease problems and other chronic medical conditions.

The loss of family farms in the United States is well-recognized. The same trend has been taking place in the developing world as well. This means that more and more residents of the developing world now have no direct means to food production. Therefore, they are more dependent on market-driven food prices. This puts more and more of them in harms way and only one market hiccup (i.e., fluctuation) from an empty fridge and/or belly. It also means that the food being produced internationally is being made with profits in mind and not with the nutritional health of the local people. Hence, the variety of foods available has declined and people have become dependent on foods grown elsewhere and foods that are more heavily processed. These are disturbing trends dictated by our culture influence.

And if these matters weren't sufficient to grab our attention, consider the multitude of other ways in which agribusiness is promoting unhealthy, inhumane, and immoral practices. The alcohol industry claimed recently that they have done studies that prove that their advertisements do not influence underage (here, meaning people under 21 years of age) drinking. Do you believe them? Considering how many young people die in vehicular accidents that are caused by those who have consumed alcohol, should we believe them? Considering how many high schoolers are into binge drinking, should we believe them? (Do we ask a fox how the hen house is doing?) The continued pumping of hormones, antibiotics and

pesticides (via their feed) into the animals that many of us eat, for no reason other than fast (unnatural) growth, "efficiency," and economic bottom lines is immoral whatever way one slices their steak. The continued blind, untested support of GMOs is immoral and a potential crime against nature. The suing of smaller farmers on the basis of "intellectual property" because their fields have become contaminated by genetic pollution blowing off of big Ag-business fields aids in the destruction of a sustainable way of life—the family farm. Price fixing by ADM (Manning), nicotine doping by the tobacco industry, and trans fat saturation by the fast food industry further convince us that we are up against some heavy and duplicitous hitters. (If there is any doubt about the unethical behavior of modern food companies, consider that one of its biggest players today is Phillip Morris, which captured a huge chunk of it in the wake of numerous billion dollar lawsuit settlements due to indiscretions surrounding its tobacco empire.) Is there any doubt left?

So what is one to do with all this information? First, go do your own research and find out about these things for yourself. Second, consider moving away from processed and highly advertised foods—especially ones that show clear signs of being bad for our health. Third, increase the amount of food that you buy locally—farmers markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture) are on the rise and they need supporters. Fourth, join the movement statewide to improve our food through the help of the Illinois Stewardship Alliance (www.illinoisstewardshipalliance.org). And most importantly, stop taking food for granted. Once more of us do this, we will be on the course to a better future. Every day, most of us are fortunate to put food in our mouths two to three times a day. Let's make this experience not only satisfying to our palates but also to our sense of fairness, our sense of humanity, and our desire for good health.

Additional Websites to visit:

The Eat Well Guide: www.eatwellguide.org; *Illinois Stewardship Alliance*: www.illinoisstewardshipalliance.org; *Pasture Based Farming*: www.eatwild.com; *Slow Food Movement*: www.slowfood.com

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