

Produce and Health

The Wacky World of Food

**"I eat when I'm hungry, and I drink when I'm dry,
and if moonshine don't kill me, I'll live 'til I die."**

For much of human existence on planet Earth, most people struggled to find enough to eat and drink. Food and drink were vital for life. Moonshine (illegal alcohol), or its equivalent, was a greater threat to human life than food or drink. Although, as the quote above shows, those who liked their alcohol were fatalistic about the consequences.

While there are still a billion or more people who struggle at times to get enough to eat and drink, most of the world's population now has secure food supplies. Ironically, it is at this juncture in history that we humans have begun to obsess about how food and drink might make us too fat, might sicken us, or might kill us.

Up is Down, and Down is Up

An army of gurus has developed to help us with our food and drink obsessions. Unfortunately, this army gives widely conflicting advice that often turns traditional wisdom upside down. For example, the Environmental Working Group responds to the saying "An apple a day, keeps the doctor away," by placing apples at the top of its "dirty dozen" foods to avoid.

Each swing in food fashions appears to beget a swing in the opposite direction. For example, the wide popularity of fast foods, has engendered the slow food movement. For each self-appointed food guru that advocates a diet low in fat, or carbohydrate, or protein, there is a rival guru that argues exactly the opposite.

The typical consumer is left perplexed by the ocean of conflicting advice about what is best to eat or drink. And, the typical farmer, who wants to provide consumers with a steady supply of wholesome food, cannot be sure whether his or her products and practices will win the acclaim of the food gurus, or draw their condemnation.

Do We Know Too Much?

Because of advances in food science, we know so much more than we once did about what is in our foods and beverages. However, we have advanced little in our understanding of what that means for our health or longevity. The early dietary studies focused on such broad constituents as proteins, fats or carbohydrates. Later studies began to examine the effects of specific components, such as vitamins, minerals, and fiber. More recently, scientists have begun measuring phytochemicals, like flavonols and anthocyanin's, and even more mysterious substances like "free radicals."

The apple is a good example of how much, and how little, we know. Population studies suggest that eating fresh apples reduces risks of cancer and heart attacks, but we still don't really know why. We can measure the content of obscure elements like dihydrochalcones in a fresh apple,

but we have little real knowledge of why eating an apple has positive health effects. As long as this uncertainty continues, the field is left wide open to all kinds of quackery.

The Food Cacophony

As our ability to dissect food has expanded, the cacophony of different voices surrounding food has exploded. Food has become a source of great worry and guilt for individuals and for societies. While some individuals worry that a particular food may clog their arteries, others are concerned that it has been produced in a way that causes suffering to animals. Some societies worry that their eating habits are increasing the cost of medical care, while others fear their food choices may be supporting a dictator in a foreign country.

Politicians see limitless opportunities to pass laws that will save citizens from the error of their food ways. Government bureaucracies pander to the politicians' wishes. Agricultural scientists lend fads credibility by studying them as if they had scientific validity. And, the mass media are attracted like flies to food because it can so easily stir human emotions. Unfortunately, the media exercise little discrimination in the food stories that they cover, and usually only add to the confusion and worry.

Spinning Off In Different Directions

The wacky world of food continues to spin off in wildly different directions. Space allows us to discuss just a few. One of the most remarkable is the way in which food chefs have been turned into celebrities who's every pronouncement on food is listened to with reverence. While pioneer celebrity chefs, like the late Julia Childs, were usually practical and self-effacing, many of today's celebrity chefs are opinionated and arrogant.

Many celebrity chefs now posture as visionary social reformers, whose mission is to save the masses from their own stupidity about food. Many have popular television or other media platforms through which to spread their message to the faithful. They can wax poetic about how some obscure herb can turn a humble tuna fish sandwich into a gourmet's delight and be dismissive of the common dishes that most ordinary folks eat.

They have become quite influential. For example, many claim that their use of local, or organic, or home-grown supplies is what gives their food its extra appeal. Their search for new flavors and tastes has spurred many affluent consumers to experiment more, whether while cooking at home or in choosing which fad restaurant to patronize.

Backward to Nature

Celebrity chefs are often allies of the food gurus who want the world to go back to an era when most food was either grown in one's home garden or grown by local farmers. They believe that food is better if bought from a local farmers market than from a convenience store; in boxes from a CSA farmer rather than from Walmart; or prepared from an itinerant food truck rather than in the fully-equipped kitchen of a bricks and mortar restaurant.

The validity of this vision is highly questionable. For example, in a double-blind test, would consumers really be able to distinguish in any way between a carrot delivered through

supermarket channels and that provided at a farmers market? I doubt it. Would there be any measureable difference in either carrot's impact on health or longevity? I doubt it.

Yet, the hype about the virtues of local production and direct marketing has persuaded many small farmers to try to produce crops and animals in otherwise inauspicious climates and growing conditions, and to sit for hours in the heat and cold and wind and rain of open-air markets to sell their produce. If one counted travel time and selling time, many of these operators do not earn even minimum wage from the proceeds of their direct sales.

Many small operators only engage in these activities because they are retired or unemployed or otherwise place a low value on their time. However, as western economies return to full employment, and these operators can earn economic returns in other activities, few will want to persist in such "sub-marginal" farming operations. ("Sub-marginal" indicates that a resource is not being put to its highest and best use.)

Forward to Streamlined Supply Systems

A powerful, opposing, trend in the food system is towards streamlined supply of uniform products twelve months a year. In this situation, resources are fully exploited. This has led growers and packers to get bigger, and processors and marketers to merge, in order to be able to meet the expanding demands of major retailers. In this, dominant sector of the food business, success is dependent on a firm's ability to specialize, to grow larger, to embrace new technologies, and to tap economies of scale. Indeed, smaller firms are at a severe handicap in meeting the requirements of this sector.

This streamlined, modern food supply system is absolutely essential if the needs of an expanding world population are to be met economically. Ironically, because major retailers have built their global systems on the capabilities of the modern supply system, they can afford the luxury of pretending that local, small-scale suppliers are important to them. This just adds to the confusion among consumers.

Woolly Thinking Begets Unwise Policies

There is a constant risk that such woolly thinking about food will beget foolish policy responses. Rather than deal with major problems like balancing budgets, funding their pension obligations or fighting crime, many national, regional, and local governments seem intent on passing more inane laws about food and beverages.

From an economist's perspective, in a world of limited resources, and growing food needs, it make sense to encourage specialization, economies of scale, adoption of new technologies and opportunities for individuals and firms to grow. Encouraging sub-marginal production and marketing operations is a luxury that affluent societies are free to choose. However, even for them, there is a limit to how much uneconomic activities an economy can afford. Such realism is not appreciated by those who prefer "feel good" policies.

Mainstream Agriculture Under Fire

However, the promoters of sub-marginal agricultural operations have considerable political influence and media savvy. (See, for example, the article on the Kellogg Foundation in the July 2012 World Apple Report).

Mainstream agriculture needs to be much more proactive in explaining its vital role in global society. Farmers and agribusinesses are already operating under many constraints imposed by laws, regulations, and retailer requirements. Additional restraints on their progressiveness could have serious long-term consequences for the real world of food.

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