

Food to die for

by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

Food kills. Though you can drive safely while eating a hamburger, and nobody has proven that donuts are addictive, the fast food culture is as dangerous as an underage driver with a six-pack or a middle-aged man with a carton of smokes. Of course, food is necessary for life, but that only makes the American food industry more insidious. As long as we want more than carrot sticks, brown rice and tofu, according to Marion Nestle's new book, food companies will continue to be as deceptive as big tobacco and as cozy with the government as the military industry. Food does not really kill, then. Only people do--the people who trade on confusion and affluence to market food that tastes so good people will risk their health for it.

*Food Politics* shows how the food industry turns wholesome natural ingredients into sweet, fatty and salty products. Only a fraction of what we pay at the supermarket goes to the producers of raw food. The cost of the corn in Kellogg's Corn Flakes, for example, is less than 10 percent of the retail price. Food companies must add value to the original ingredients in order to turn a profit--but the more they add, the more consumers seem to lose.

Any way you look at it, the numbers add up to one conclusion: Americans are getting more obese by the minute. Nestle, chair of nutrition studies at New York University, has been on the front line of the food wars as managing editor of the first—and so far only—Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health, which appeared in 1988. Her book offers ample proof that for the sake of profit large corporations conspire with the government to manipulate and confuse consumers. While her research on the cynicism of the food industry and complacency of the government is alarming, her rhetoric is predictable. Indeed, her conspiracy theory fits right into the culture of victimhood and complaint.

Nestle never quite answers the question of how taste buds could be so vulnerable to systematic manipulation and deception. What is missing is a broader grasp of the basic human problem of gluttony and a more historical analysis of the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of eating.

Meat, for example, is deeply ingrained in the American diet. For many men, cooking and cutting meat is a basic expression of masculinity, and for many Americans, a meal without meat is simply not a meal. Yet the science of nutrition has been preaching the benefits of a plant-based diet for over 50 years. For evidence, one need only note how the diet of those living in poor countries saves them from many of the diseases that plague affluent Americans.

Remarkably, the number of overweight people in the world, 1.1 billion, now equals the number of undernourished people. Nonetheless, the media are awash with conflicting food studies, and confused consumers are eating more animal-based foods than ever before.

Nestle admits that scientific nutritional advice, which basically boils down to "eat your veggies," can be dull. Such advice is also vulnerable to the food industry's well-funded efforts to undermine dietary recommendations. For example, meat producers successfully changed the original language of the USDA Food Pyramid from "eat less meat and dairy foods" to "choose lean meat" and consume products "low in saturated fats."

The results of such obfuscations are disastrous. Nestle points out that cigarette smoking and poor diet each contribute to about one-fifth of annual deaths in the U.S. The simple message of "Don't smoke" should be coupled with another national campaign slogan: "Eat less." More specifically, "Eat less meat and less sugar." Nevertheless, food companies continue to argue that any food product can be part of a balanced diet.

The irony is that we are the victims of our own success. The American food supply is so abundant that we can feed everyone in this country twice over, even after subtracting food exports. This surplus, combined with an affluent population, forces the food industry into a fierce competition for consumer dollars. To generate profits, food companies must accomplish one of two aims. They must persuade us to choose their product rather than their competitor's. Or they must convince us to eat more than we should, in order to increase their sales. The foods that are most profitable to the industry are those high in fat, sugar and salt. So the bottom line of corporate profit relies on the expanding posteriors of the American public.

As Nestle points out, most of us think that we choose food based on taste, cost and convenience; we resist thinking of ourselves as easy targets of marketing strategies.

Consequently, we overestimate our own rationality and underestimate the power of advertising. Just try taking some kids to a McDonald's and forcing them to order salad. We are much less in control of our lives than we would like to think.

Indeed, marketers are especially adept at intriguing children with bad food. Soft drink companies, for example, hook younger children on "liquid candy" in order to establish brand loyalty at the earliest possible age. As a result, most children consume too many calories--child obesity is rising at alarming rates--and still do not come close to having diets that meet nutritional recommendations. According to Nestle, American children obtain 50 percent of their calories from added fat and sugar, while only 1 percent of them eat according to the Food Pyramid.

There are signs that people are becoming aware of the need for greater accountability in the food industry. With increasing worry about terrorism, food safety has now become a priority for the government, and politicians are talking about consolidating the various federal inspection programs into one agency that would be responsible for policing the nation's food supply. This would vastly improve the current system, in which the Food and Drug Administration is responsible for cheese pizza and the Agriculture Department is responsible for pepperoni pizza. But even heightened concerns about domestic security might not be enough to shake the food industry's influence over federal policy.

The solution to food politics is not food science. The problem with diet goes deeper than that. What we eat is an expression of who we are, and how we eat is governed by ritual and tradition. Diet is too personal to be political and too habitual to be affected by facts and statistics. Most people need to have a change of heart before they will change what they eat. This is why so many vegetarians act like they have joined a new religious movement when they reject our carnivorous culture. The solution is a total transformation of our lives that would include, rather than ignore, the question of diet.

Many of the early church fathers argued that gluttony was the original sin. That we so ravenously eat what we know we shouldn't is one of the surest signs that our stomachs are out of alignment with our heads. If food can kill us, then fast food is slow murder, and our bodies cry out against us. Far from being passive victims of the super-size-it food race, we hustle toward the finish line of obesity and heart disease, even though our gait is slowed by our girth.

In eating as in sex, the means has become the end. Pleasure, not nourishment or procreation, is our goal. Indeed, Nestle makes the case that food companies treat nutrition as only one ingredient in a product's marketing strategy. Colored ketchup, meat-flavored French fries and genetically modified potatoes all indicate that we have learned to treat the laws of nature as obstacles to be overcome, not necessary limits provided by God. Where morality is reduced to personal taste, it should not be surprising that eating is liberated from healthy constraints. We eat in ways that would have made even the Roman emperors blush with envy.

Such gluttony has resulted in a protest movement that seeks salvation in whole foods and free-range meats. Some small food companies that meet this demand are now trying to educate consumers about healthy dietary decisions. Large corporations, however, inevitably turn the romantic return-to-nature movement into yet another ingredient of the relentless pursuit of profit.

We cannot go back to the diet of Eden, but we can develop theologies that treat food as a religious concern. One measure of the practical relevance of every theology should be how it helps us to find God's grace in the food we eat, so that our mealtime prayers really speak to what is at hand. Every meal should anticipate the heavenly banquet of the peaceable kingdom, where everyone will have enough to eat and no blood is shed.

Every meal should also be a reflection of that most fundamental of Christian meals, the Eucharist. The Eucharist, in fact, should shape not only how but also what we eat. It is a frugal and peaceful meal. While it is often glibly said that you are what you eat, in the Eucharist we truly hope one day to be worthy of the food of which we partake.