





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

DESPITE A NATIONAL OBSESSION WITH THE IDEAL OF EATING AND EXERCISING FOR LIFETIME HEALTH, BAD FOOD AND COUCH-POTATO LIFESTYLES STILL RULE. A FULL ISSUE OF *h* REPORTS ON PEOPLE AND PROGRAMS ON A MISSION TO RIGHTSIZED A SUPERSIZED WORLD.
BY CHRISTINE H. O'TOOLE

urveying a decade's worth of debate on one of the most basic human activities, renowned food author Michael Pollan poses a plaintive question: "What other animal needs professional help in deciding what it should eat?"

Pollan's sly query, delivered in his 2008 book "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto," poked fun at discussions that have reached feverish proportions. The sage famously suggested that healthy eating was actually a simple proposition, one he summarized in seven words: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

That prescription would have seemed revolutionary a few decades ago. But slowly, as Americans learn the dangers of our 50-year binge on processed foods, those ideas have taken root. Labels such as “free-range,” “omega-3,” “gluten-free” and “organic” have become part of our food vocabulary, and seasonal farmers markets are returning to local street corners.

So, even though there’s a nice buzz going about healthy eating, we still need to lose a lot of pounds. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that two-thirds of the adults in this country, and one-third of our children, are now obese or overweight. Pollan may be right when he calls Americans “a notably unhealthy population preoccupied with nutrition and diet and the idea of eating healthily.”

And preoccupation might be an understatement. From our neighbors down the street to celebrities on television to politicians in government—or their spouses—a multitude is challenging us today to think carefully about various aspects of our food. To help separate the wisdom from the chatter, this year’s Women’s Health & the Environment conference in downtown Pittsburgh included a focus on ways to improve what and how we eat. The April event was sponsored by The Heinz Endowments, foundation Chairman Teresa Heinz and Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC.

This special food issue of *h* magazine follows up on the issues raised during the conference and offers some common-sense approaches to making our diet safe, healthy and sustainable. The stories reveal strategies to encourage farmers to produce more fresh foods for their local communities; foods that promote good health and help fight disease; national and local trends to promote consuming more nutritious food; and food-equity programs that provide low-income communities with access to healthy eating options.

This modern-day exploration contrasts sharply with the first 2.5 million years of human history, when the only food quest was avoiding starvation. Hunting and gathering took vast amounts of energy and ingenuity. As late as World War II, doctors examining U.S. Army recruits were shocked to find that many were malnourished. Since then, the rise of industrial agriculture has saved lives all over the world.

But progress has come at a cost. In the post-war era, food was cheap, and Americans ate more of it. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that daily calorie consumption has grown by 24.5 percent, or about 530 calories, just since 1970, but not all those calories promote health. Two cans of soda contain about 300 calories, more than half the difference between our former and current daily intake.

As a result, four of the top 10 causes of death in the United States today are chronic diseases with well-established links to diet: coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancer.

“The average American eats 150 pounds of food additives a year,” pediatrician Alan Greene, a proponent of better childhood nutrition, told the audience at the women’s health conference. After explaining to the group how endangered animal species in a California zoo are fed only high-quality organic food, Greene asked: What are we doing to preserve our own species? The answer, he suggested, lies in fewer preservatives, artificial flavorings and dyes—in short, fresh and healthy food.

Consumers are demanding change, and companies and institutions are responding. McDonald’s restaurants have eliminated unhealthy hydrogenated oils, or trans fats. Schools, including many around Pittsburgh, banned sugary soda from the cafeteria line, adding fresh fruit and whole grains. Better product labeling spells out nutrients and calories. All those developments help families make healthy choices.

Among them is the First Family. When Michelle Obama planted the first sustainably grown vegetable plot at the White House since Eleanor Roosevelt’s Victory Garden, she was sowing—and selling—an idea: The healthiest foods are those grown closest to home. Paradoxically, for many communities across the country, locally grown food remains scarce. The nearby Walmart stocks crates of Hawaiian pineapples, but no apples from the farm up the road. The problem is particularly acute in poor neighborhoods—both urban and rural—where there are few good supermarkets.

Will Allen calls those communities “food deserts.” The charismatic founder of Growing Power, a pioneering urban farming program, told the Women’s Health & the Environment audience that reducing the disparity is

24.5

THE PERCENTAGE OF INCREASE
IN DAILY CALORIE CONSUMPTION
SINCE 1970

4

THE NUMBER OF THE TOP 10 CAUSES OF DEATH
IN THE UNITED STATES THAT ARE
CAUSED BY CHRONIC DISEASES RELATED TO DIET

150

THE NUMBERS OF POUNDS OF
FOOD ADDITIVES THE AVERAGE AMERICAN
EATS EACH YEAR

“a challenge that will be solved by a new crop of farmers,” who will devise ways to boost the production and quality of even small local farms. Allen’s original three-acre Milwaukee plot now produces \$600,000 worth of fresh food annually—ranging from fish to honey to greens. “Our next farmers will come from cities and universities, and 60 percent of them will be under age 40,” he predicts.

Those future farmers of America might be found in Pittsburgh schoolyards right now. With help from the Endowments, students at four city elementary schools have participated in the Edible Schoolyard project, a creation of chef and healthful foods advocate Alice Waters. Their harvest from these permanent gardens is whipped into a delicious meal by visiting local chefs—a hands-on lesson that fresh, local ingredients taste great.

No matter what children learn in school, mothers are responsible for their nourishment, especially before birth. Education programs, including several at Magee-Womens Hospital, help young mothers learn how to avoid harmful chemicals during their pregnancies and in their homes. They are following Dr. Greene’s guidelines to feed their babies “green,” shopping more carefully than ever.

That’s why Environmental Protection Agency Director Lisa Jackson believes that progress toward healthy eating, as well as a healthy environment, will be led by mothers like herself. “Women make purchasing decisions for healthier, safer products,” she told the women’s health conferees in Pittsburgh. “It will be women who will change this debate forever.”

Among those women is Nancy Nichols, author of the 2008 book “Lake Effect,” which chronicles the link between the pollution of her Illinois hometown and her sister’s fatal ovarian cancer, as well as her own pancreatic cancer diagnosis. She was one of 2,800 participants applauding Jackson’s remarks.

Nichols’ personal experience led her to activism, as well as to thoughtful choices. “Acting responsibly means more than just being a smart shopper,” she says. “It means staying informed, pressing for needed reforms and supporting causes I care about.” *h*