

**April 8, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "The danger of American Foods"**

In 1963, as I immigrated to the U. S. deathly afraid of airplanes, I traveled by boat. Stepping ashore in New York, my first order of business was sampling American fare. At a nearby eatery I ordered a piece of cherry pie and a bottle of coke. The pie looked luscious; the coke was a novelty yet unobtainable in Europe.

I could not eat and drink what I had ordered. The stuff was so sickeningly sweet, it made me gag. By the same token, my spouse-to-be complained about European pastries: "Very disappointing. No taste."

Many of today's cereals are candy rather than breakfast, containing fifty percent or more sugar per box. Sugar—cane, fructose, corn—is much cheaper than grains; boxed cereals sell consumers the sugar at grain prices. Of course, it's the colorful pictures on the boxes, and the heavy advertising to children, that compels parents to shoulder the expense, simultaneously paying for the ill health of their children. When sugar got a bad rap some years back, "Sugar Frosted Flakes" became "Frosted Flakes." Other manufacturers changed "Sugar" labels to "Honey." The sugar content remained undiminished.

Food researchers have discovered that sugar lights up the "pleasure centers" in our brains similar to drug addiction. "Processed sugar in certain individuals can produce compulsive patterns of intake," says Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Members of Overeaters Anonymous often discuss sugar like it was heroin. Their only survival strategy is to stay away from the stuff altogether.

As if it weren't bad enough that fast-food manufacturers and its soft-drink coevals have ramped up the sugar in the American diet to unprecedented levels, "convenience food" contains salt and fat at staggering proportions. Profits—and Wall Street—are merciless drivers. So powerful are the industries, government regulators have been unable to prevail against them. Indeed, some government agencies—the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in particular—actively collaborate in the scheme, encouraging consumption of more red meat, more butter, more cheese.

The industries peddle their wares abroad as aggressively as at home. In a few cases, governments have curbed the most grievous excesses. For example, in the late 1970s, Finland's adult males were consuming twice, sometimes three times, the sodium they should be taking in. Then the Finish government embarked on a massive public-education campaign, simultaneously forcing manufactures to label every grocery item loaded with salt with the warning, "high in salt" while low-sodium fare could be touted accordingly. The result: By 2007, Finland's per capita consumption of salt had dropped by one-third; deaths from stroke and heart disease had fallen by 80 percent.

Michael Jacobson directs the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). I am an avid supporter, subscribing to CSPI's monthly newsletter, "Nutrition Action," which is immensely

helpful in making intelligent food choices. Since 2005, Jacobson has forced Kellogg to limit its advertising to young kids, Sara Lee to acknowledge that its “whole grain bread” is only 30 percent whole grain, PepsiCo to change the labeling of Tropicana Peach Papaya Juice to reflect the fact that it contains neither peaches nor papaya, nor is it a juice.

The country’s high-blood-pressure rates, linked to sodium consumption, are of grave concern to Jacobson. Already in 1978 he petitioned the FDA to reclassify salt from an ingredient to “an additive that poses health concerns,” which would allow FDA to mandate limits or warning labels. A massive campaign by Frito-Lay and similar “snack” manufacturers brought his efforts to naught. Some giant food companies—Kraft, General Foods—had been acquired by tobacco giants like Philip Morris, and they applied Big Tobacco’s disingenuous sales tactics to fast-food marketing. But Jacobson, who trained as microbiologist at MIT, isn’t done yet.

Overconsumption of fat is the third in the unholy triad that’s Jacobson’s red flag. The mainstays of processed foods that pump big doses of saturated fat into our bodies are chesses and red meat. Here’s where USDA’s conflict of interest comes in. “On one side are the 312 million or so people of the United States and their health, which the USDA is charged with safeguarding,” writes Michael Moss in his 2013 “Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us.” Conspiring against the 312 million are “the three hundred or so companies that form the \$1 trillion industry of food manufacturing, companies the USDA feels obligated to placate and nurture.”

While Americans are saddled with epidemics of obesity and hardened arteries, USDA grants the industry “its every wish.” As concerns “the greatest sources of fat”—red meat and cheese—USDA has become “a full partner in the most urgent mission of all: cajoling the people to eat more.” Not only does USDA subsidize Big Beef and Big Dairy, it undertakes marketing programs for both—all with taxpayer money.

Domino’s now delivers 1.6 million pizzas a month in Mexico. USDA’s 2002 report to Congress boasted, “In Mexico, a joint promotion with Domino’s Pizza featured the USDEC logo on all Domino’s pizza boxes with the slogan, ‘Made with 100% U.S. cheese’.” Meanwhile, notes the author of “Salt Sugar Fat,” as “taxpayer money was being used to promote cheese in Mexico, the people of Mexico were on their way to having the highest rates of obesity in the world after U.S. citizens.”

I have learned to stay away from granola bars, trail mixes, Go-Gurt, Lunchables, and other “healthful choices” so-called. On travels I take unsalted nuts and raisins, the occasional boiled egg without salt, apples, carrots, celery stalks filled with smidgens of peanut butter. If airline seatmates snicker and sniff, so be it.