

Eat Real Food

Marion Nestle lets no foil-wrapped treat or fluorescently alluring drink go unchallenged in her campaign to expose what she calls dodgy marketing ploys meant to sell Americans on processed foods. On her blog, www.foodpolitics.com, she tangles with corporations and government agencies that hurl fierce criticism right back at her. Author of books on the scientific, economic and social influences of food choice such as *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* and *What to Eat*, her day job is professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University. She has a doctorate in molecular biology and a Master of Public Health in nutrition.

Interviewed by Donna Stokes, *World Ark* managing editor

WorldArk: *Why do you think people are confused about nutrition and healthful eating?*

MARION NESTLE: It has to do with research, specifically the way the press covers research, and also with marketing. Much of it is focused on single nutrients rather than food. And the minute you start talking about single nutrients and not food you're in trouble, because unprocessed foods contain lots and lots of nutrients required in the human diet in different proportions. When you're eating a varied diet, you don't give it another thought.

But variety, moderation and balance are a hard sell to the public. Nobody really knows what those things mean. And there's so much marketing around specific nutrients that people are eating the most ridiculous products, thinking they're good for them. PowerBars leap to mind. I think they're a ridiculous product because they don't taste very good. Why would you want to eat something

like that when you could eat real food?

Explain why you're fed up with food companies' health claims displayed on food packaging.

In a funny sort of way this kind of marketing isn't supposed to appeal to your higher cognitive functions. You're not supposed to really notice them. Take for example the "immunity" banner on Cocoa Krispies cereal. I was just floored by that; how do they get away with saying that? By allowing some of these claims, the [Food and Drug Administration] isn't doing its job very well.

If you're a customer coming into the store, you're supposed to think "this cereal has antioxidants in it, so if I buy this cereal it's good for my kid." So I can buy this junky, sugary, low-fiber cereal for my kid, and it'll be fine because it's got all of these good things in it. But what you're not thinking is that your kid is unlikely to be short of those things anyway, if you're

feeding her a vegetable now and then. I think it has to do with the way we're hard-wired, because everybody falls for those messages. It's very hard to shift into critical mode when you're in a hurry and you just want to get food and go home.

So what should change?

I think people should be eating real food and as little processed food as possible. We have a big obesity problem, with many of the excess calories in people's diets coming from junk foods. So I want to shift people away from the middle aisles of the grocery store and into the peripheral aisles. And also do something about portion sizes. If it is served to you, you don't always stop to think, "Oh my heaven, that's enormous, if I eat that much I'm going to be taking in three times as many calories than if I only ate a third of it." You don't go through that. You just eat it and it tastes good. Somehow there's room for it.

I'm one big believer in regulation in the food area. Companies, left to their own, will sell more food. That's their job. They don't care how they do it. So I think we need some checks and balances. If it were up to me we wouldn't have health claims on food products at all.

Can you have a business-friendly economy and a focus on good nutrition?

This is how capitalism works—the strong win and the weak lose. I'm not against business, and I'm not even against the right to make junk foods. I think companies have a right to make junk foods; people have the right to eat junk foods. I'd just like to see the proportions shift. Junk foods are not everyday foods. People should not be eating at McDonald's every day. When my kids were little they went to McDonald's on their birthdays; it was a really big deal. And I wouldn't have another thought about that. But every day? That's not a good idea. There are plenty of people who eat these foods every day and think that's normal, think that that's what you're supposed to eat because they're heavily advertised.

Explain what you mean when you say hunger should be addressed as a social, not technological, problem.

When you've got hunger in developing countries, it has to do with the fact that people are poor. The people are disenfranchised—their governments are inadequate to maintain stability, they're at war, they've had natural disasters. The hunger results from the fact that people don't have access to education, housing, transportation or political stability, and



Marion Nestle visits Heifer Headquarters in Little Rock, Ark.

so you have to solve those problems before you can have a sustainable solution.

My favorite current example of a technological solution is Plumpy'Nut. It's this sugary, peanut butter supplement given to kids in disaster situations. I think it's completely unsustainable. It's a 500-calorie peanut butter supplement in a foil pack. Studies have shown that if you give kids this treat they do much better than kids who don't get it. Of course they would, it's 500 calories. I think it's a really bad idea. Somebody has to pay for them; they get brought in. You get kids thinking they're supposed to eat food that comes in packages. It's sweet, also not a good idea. In that situation you're much better off eating local foods. But if you want to come in to those situations to teach people how to make and eat local foods, it is a much slower, more difficult task, especially

in places that don't have stable governments. These food aid things come in, disrupt the local food supply, and then the suppliers leave.

What is your solution for the concern that healthy, organic, locally grown food is available only to the wealthy and not the poor or those on food stamps?

My first question is why should poor people have worse food than rich people? Almost everyone I know who is involved in this food movement wants everybody to have access to this kind of local foods. You have to ask the questions why are fruits and vegetables inaccessible in low-income areas? And why are fruits and vegetables so disproportionately expensive? That has to do with federal policy, what gets subsidized. So this is about politics. This isn't about elitism. We've made choices as a society to make corn, soybeans and wheat very cheap. Subsidized. We have made choices as a society to not subsidize fruits and vegetables, or organics. So that's a choice. We could change that choice.

How would you sum up your food philosophy?

Eat less, move more. Eat real food, not products. Support local farmers and grow food at home. Cook at home. Teach kids to cook; that's the most revolutionary thing you can do from the standpoint of food.

I don't think it's any more complicated than that. Learn how to deal with food marketing. Understand that this is about democracy: Of the people, by the people, for the people. Is that too idealistic? I don't know. I think it works.

To read more, visit Nestle's blog at www.foodpolitics.com.