

# One Thing to Do About Food



A FORUM edited by Alice Waters

## Eric Schlosser

Every year the fast-food chains, soda companies and processed-food manufacturers spend billions marketing their products. You see their ads all the time. They tend to feature a lot of attractive, happy, skinny people having fun. But you rarely see what's most important about the food: where it comes from, how it's made and what it contains. Tyson ads don't show chickens crammed together at the company's factory farms, and Oscar Mayer ads don't reveal what really goes into those wieners. There's a good reason for this. Once you learn how our modern industrial food system has transformed what most Americans eat, you become highly motivated to eat something else.

The National Uniformity for Food Act of 2005, passed by the House and now before the Senate, is a fine example of how food companies and their allies work hard to keep consumers in the dark. Backed by the American Beverage Association, the American Frozen Food Association, the Coca-Cola Company, ConAgra Foods, the National Restaurant Association, the International Food Additives Council, Kraft Foods, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the US Chamber of Commerce, among many others, the new law would prevent states from having food safety or labeling requirements stricter than those of the federal government. In the name of "uniformity," it would impose rules that are uniformly bad. State laws that keep lead out of children's candy and warn pregnant women about dangerous ingredients would be wiped off the books.

What single thing could change the US food system, practically overnight? Widespread public awareness—of how this system operates and whom it benefits, how it harms consumers, how it mistreats animals and pollutes the land, how it corrupts public officials and intimidates the press, and most of all, how its power ultimately depends on a series of cheerful and ingenious lies. The modern environmental movement began forty-four years ago when *Silent Spring* exposed the deceptions behind the idea of "better living through chemistry." A similar movement is now gaining momentum on behalf of sustainable agriculture and real food. We must not allow the fast-food industry, agribusiness and Congress to deceive us. "We urgently need an end to these false assurances, to the sugar-coating of unpalatable facts," Rachel Carson famously argued. "In the words of Jean Rostand, 'The obligation to endure gives us the right to know.'"

*Eric Schlosser is the author of Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal and, with Charles Wilson, Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food (both Houghton Mifflin). The movie version of Fast Food Nation, directed by Richard Linklater, will be released on November 17.*

## Marion Nestle

From a public health perspective, obesity is the most serious nutrition problem among children as well as adults in the United States. The roots of this problem can be traced to farm policies and Wall Street. Farm subsidies, tariffs and trade agreements support a food supply that provides 3,900 calories per day per capita, roughly twice the average need, and 700 calories a day higher than in 1980, at the dawn of the obesity epidemic. In this overabundant food economy, companies must compete fiercely for sales, not least because of Wall Street's expectations for quarterly growth. These pressures induce companies to make highly profitable "junk" foods, market them directly to children and advertise such foods as appropriate for consumption at all times, in large amounts, by children of all ages. In this business environment, childhood obesity is just collateral damage.

Adults may be fair game for marketers, but children are not. Children cannot distinguish sales pitches from information unless taught to do so. Food companies spend at least \$10 billion annually enticing children to desire food brands and to pester parents to buy them. The result: American children consume more than one-third of their daily calories from soft drinks, sweets, salty snacks and fast food. Worse, food marketing subverts parental authority by making children believe they are supposed to be eating such foods and they—not their parents—know what is best for them to eat.

Today's marketing methods extend beyond television to include Internet games, product placements, character licensing and word-of-mouth campaigns—stealth methods likely to be invisible to parents. When restrictions have been called for, the food industry has resisted, invoking parental responsibility and First Amendment rights, and proposing self-regulation instead. But because companies cannot be expected to act against corporate self-interest, government regulations are essential. Industry pressures killed attempts to regulate television advertising to children in the late 1970s, but obesity is a more serious problem now.

It is time to try again, this time to stop all forms of marketing foods to kids—both visible and stealth. Countries in Europe and elsewhere are taking such actions, and we could too. Controls on marketing may not be sufficient to prevent childhood obesity, but they would make it easier for parents to help children to eat more healthfully.

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