

Implementation

NUTRITION WATCH

A MODEST PROPOSAL

By Joan Dye Gussow

It would be immodest—and probably inaccurate—for those of us who are health professionals to congratulate ourselves on the current popularity of fruits and vegetables—even though we would enjoy getting the credit. The honest fact is that we have been pushing produce for years—along with several generations of Moms—without much apparent success. So if we want credit for the new veggie craze, we really are obliged to explain why it took so long to make our point.

And we'll need to explain something else: if the public is really taking our advice, why is it that folks are not content with those run-of-the-mill vegetables—peas, carrots, spinach, corn, iceberg lettuce—we've been touting all these years? Why are they instead creating what *The New York Times* describes as an "insatiable market" for new produce—"A Garden of Exotic Delights," as *American Health* called it last summer?

Mom sure wasn't pushing spaghetti squash, winter melons, black bell peppers, and bok choy—and neither were those of us who were professionally dedicated to talking the meat-hungry American public into putting a little

greenery on their plates. We already had the most abundant and varied food supply in the world; why did we need perfumed quince, kabocha squash and pepinos?

The fact that these produce novelties have been featured in *American Health* suggests that the fitness rage is part of the explanation, but one can be fit without adding radicchio, carambola, jicama, or even kiwi to one's diet. Which suggests that what we are dealing with here is not merely health, but another American fad. I would like to speculate that our vegetable passion is at least partly the result of the American public applying its lust for novelty—so carefully cultivated by food manufacturers—to objects created by nature. We're used to having dozens of varieties of cookies, cereals, crackers, and juice drinks. If we're going to eat fruits and vegetables, by golly, they had better keep creating new ones. We're easily bored.

But there is even more going on here than immediately meets the eye. How and why does all this exotic produce get here, costing little more than the Florida and California stuff we've had all along? Part of it is local entrepreneurship. But much of it is a consequence of the surprising fact that we have become the world's largest food importer; foods produced by people all over the world—many of them poor and hungry—are being sucked into our country by our affluence and high interest rates and by their horrendous debts. They have to sell us something. Now those of us who are getting rich and overfed can eat healthfully without getting bored.

One of my students had an interesting experience this year which is worth reporting. On a visit to New York's wholesale market in October—when local produce was (at least theoretically) available—she was surprised to see a lot of produce from the Dominican Republic. The surprise arose from her recollection that there had been food riots in the Dominican Republic recently. Checking the USDA market report which shows rail, truck and air de-

liveries to large cities, she found that the Dominican Republic had shipped into New York lettuce, cantaloupe, okra, peas, pineapple, plantain, pumpkin, berries, herbs, tropical fruits and vegetables and oriental vegetables. More surprising than the variety was the astonishing increase in the amount shipped. In 1982 the Dominican Republic shipped only six million pounds of produce to Hunts Point; in 1983 they shipped 270 million pounds. Why the increase? It is surely not incidental that during this period the country was negotiating with the International Monetary Fund for a loan; one of the demands the IMF makes of financially-strapped countries is to urge them to increase exports in order to earn foreign currency. A country such as the Dominican Republic hasn't got much to export except the products of its eroding soils. As my student asked, "What did it cost the Dominican Republic socially and ecologically to drastically increase its food exports (to New York City alone) from six million to 270 million pounds?"



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What YOU Can Do

- **Buy the single** of "We Are the World," album, video, and related USA for Africa merchandise (write the USA for Africa Foundation, 6420 Wilshire Blvd., 19th floor, Los Angeles, CA 90048). If you buy a sweatshirt or T-shirt, WEAR IT. Whatever the medium, the message remains the same: people need help.
- **Organize an event** – a carwash, bake sale, garage sale – and raise both money and awareness; host a party where guests are invited to make any contribution they can afford.
- **Keep people informed** in your school, church or civic group; invite expert speakers to address your group; encourage your school to create an African Development Day; form a USA for Africa task force in your community. Use your imagination: everything helps.
- **Contact your Congresspersons;** (see box on page 23) find out what Congress is doing to help and let them know you support any reasonable program to help Africa and the world. Better yet, write to the President at The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20500.
- **Ask local media** – newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations – to help keep the hunger problem visible. Don't give up. Suffering in Africa and elsewhere will not end overnight; neither should anyone's effort to help!



Photos by Mohammed Amin Nalrobi Bureau Chief, VIS News

In Mek'ele, Ethiopia, members of the USA for Africa team meet some children. Kneeling at left, Harry Belafonte. From left, standing: the Deputy Commissioner of Ethiopia's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Ken Kragen, Julie Belafonte, and Marty Rogol.

Why Are Africans Dying?

(from page 5)

tions between nations and within divided societies. The international response to this crisis, if it is to be at all effective, must be comprehensive and sustained. It must also foster genuine economic and social development based upon principles of equality and democracy within African societies and between African states and the world's industrial nations.

In the short term, this means devoting increased attention and resources to literacy campaigns, agricultural extension programs, public health projects, leadership training, community organizing and institutional development. At the same time, support must increase for integrated rural and urban development that empowers the poor through education, training and direct involvement in project planning and implementation.

The most urgent long-term issue is the cancellation of the multi-billion dollar debt that African states bear. Inequalities within African states need to be redressed through programs targeted at small producers, ethnic minorities and women, not through self-serving elites. Meanwhile, so long as

East-West competition for influence fosters an African arms race, surpluses that do accrue may be wasted on weapons of war.

What is needed now is international recognition that present trends are leading Africa and the world as a whole down the road to global disaster. Private Voluntary Organizations like Grassroots International have both a special opportunity and a fundamental obligation not only to provide immediate relief to the victims of individual disasters, but also to grapple with their causes and to mobilize our domestic constituencies to support lasting global solutions to the poverty, injustice and war which lie at the root of the problem.

The death and displacement of millions of Africans are more than moral tragedies—they are a warning that the time has come for deep-rooted change. The stakes are too high to do any less.

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**Ethiopia:
Hungry for Peace**

(from page 4)

switched allegiance to the Soviet Union, the U.S. immediately became the major arms purveyor and military trainer to Somalia, a role previously held by the Soviet Union.

Over the past five years, the U.S. government has increased its military assistance to the three nations surrounding Ethiopia (Somalia, Kenya and the Sudan) by 220 percent. The Reagan administration has increased the number of African countries receiving U.S. military aid from 14 to 40.

Rather than smugly comparing our country with the Soviet Union, we should pressure our government to lead not in warmaking but in peacemaking. The U.S. should challenge all other outside powers to halt all military aid and sales to the Horn of Africa. Only such a reversal of policy can give real aid to the hungry, for the millions who go hungry also truly hunger for peace. ■

The *answer* to that question is that the New York consumer has no idea what it costs the Dominican Republic. In fact, as I have pointed out earlier (*Food Monitor*, #34, July/August 1983), this failure to signal to the consumer the true cost of the food consumed is built into the economic system. The New York consumer selecting among the tropical delicacies brought from the poor south to the rich north does not know what has been lost in social equity, agricultural sustainability and human well-being to deliver a South African nectarine to a Manhattan fruit stand at an affordable price. Indeed, it took Jessica Lange and Cissy Spacek to attract our attention to the fact that our own agricultural system is in anguish. In Wendell Berry's phrase, we now are eating more thoughtlessly than any people in history.

As an educator I have tried for some time to understand how we might teach people to care for the food-producing capacity of the planet. Given the realities of contemporary life, in which we are inundated with little bits of data and have almost no useful information on which to base our everyday decisions, I do not see how people will be able to attend to the real cost of their food unless the sources of that food can be made less remote.

Which brings me to my modest proposal. Why not make it fashionable to pay attention to where our food comes from? I propose that we create a new competition among those upwardly mobile professionals currently striving to conquest in the how-many-restaurants-did-you-eat-in game. The goal of the new competition will be to eat from as close to home as possible; status will be won by consuming only objects with whose life histories one is intimately familiar.

Now some of you who are acquainted with my views on other subjects may have noticed that I am once again riding my regional/seasonal eating hobbyhorse. I believe that it is possible, on economic, ecological, and justice grounds to make a very powerful argument on behalf of the need to decentralize agriculture and encourage a food-first policy around the world. But I am arguing here that such a solution would be rational if there were no grounds other than educational ones.

We cannot learn to eat thoughtfully when the information we need about the fate of various biosystems necessary to support agriculture is not available to us in any timely sense. It is hard enough to get city folk to remember that a succession of "beautiful beach days" may be disastrous for their drought-afflicted local growers; it is more than we should hope for that they will regularly attend to the growing weather in Central America or the Caribbean.

"We now are eating more thoughtlessly than any people in history"

One major objection that will be raised to the proposition that we should make re-localized eating fashionable is that regional/seasonal foods—unlike the exotics now piquing our palates—would be boringly unpalatable, especially in some regions, especially in some seasons. And it cannot be denied that some proposals for "self-sufficeint diets" in the northeast have been painfully heavy on kale and soybeans. As one who finds it inconceivable that humans could learn to like Twinkies or Kool Whip, or, for that matter, endive, I admit I don't really understand the problem. Since my husband and I live year around largely out of our own New York State garden with the help of a freezer, I don't find the idea of a more local diet appalling.

Nevertheless, for those accustomed to kiwi and strawberries in December, I have from time to time assigned students to test the feasibility of diets based on foods available in winter and early spring (the hard times of the year for those of you who have forgotten the seasons) in climatically-demanding parts of the country. The menus they came up with—even under the very severe constraints of using no canned or frozen foods—were surprisingly tasty and very high in the vitamins, minerals and fiber which are the rationale for eating fruits and vegetables for health reasons. These are, it should be noted, not local diets that are militantly self-sufficient. They are merely diets less radically inefficient in ecological

terms than the ones most of us are now consuming.

In the long run, the development of sustainable food systems around the world doubtless will depend on creating dietary patterns in each area dependent upon some carefully thought out mix of local production and rational import: a system designed to work with nature and minimize the waste of scarce natural resources. How can we even begin to bring about such a food system? There was a time when I believed that the federal government could and would do a lot to encourage the wise solution in such problems. But my faith in the federal government rises and falls depending on who is in office, and I am increasingly convinced that with even the best government, the scale is simply wrong. Countries such as Norway can have food policies; they have a population smaller than that of New York City. We are just too big. I am not convinced that the federal government knows how to (even if it wanted to) create and support a re-localized agricultural system.

But I believe that ordinary people could create such a system—perhaps stimulated by extraordinary people. Augustus Schumacher, the newly-appointed Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Massachusetts, recently commented that a strong consumer-driven demand for local produce was helping to revive the Massachusetts farm economy. So we're already on the way. What is needed now is a campaign that will change people's thinking about what kinds of foods it is worth making an effort to obtain.

Let's make it fashionable to eat and serve not the tenderest lettuces flown in from Belgium but the lettuces grown closest to home. Let's make it gauche to serve a gassed tomato—or any tomato that has traveled extensively. What can the trend-setters do with the produce we've got—or could have—in various parts of the country if there was a demand for it? How can the season be extended without cheating? Imagine the challenge! Fashionable people used to steal each other's cooks. Perhaps one day soon they'll be stealing each other's farmers. Lord knows it's probably a better way of supporting agriculture than any the White House has come up with.

What's In Your Favorite Fast Food? . . .and is it healthy?

Consumers may soon know that if the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in Washington, the New York State Consumer Protection Board, and the Food Allergy Committee of the American College of Allergists have their way.

The three groups have petitioned the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Agriculture "to lift the veil of secrecy from fast food."

Michael F. Jacobson, CSPI's executive director, said: "Consumers rely on ingredient disclosure to avoid substances to which they are allergic or that are linked to diet-related diseases. Without informative labeling, the composition of fast foods remains a mystery."

Fast-food restaurants constitute a \$47.1 billion market, making it the fastest-moving segment of the eating place market. Two ingredients often found in fast food that some people may need to avoid are FD&C yellow dye #5 and MSG.

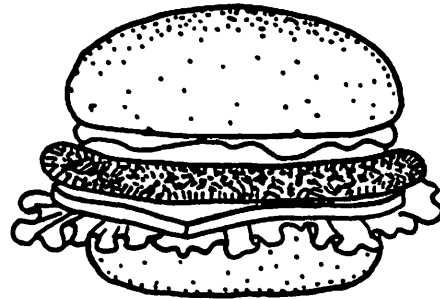
In recent months, CSPI asked major fast food chains to say what ingredients

they use in their products. Only one — Arby's — was completely forthcoming. The others either made no response or said the information was "confidential" or "not available."

CSPI made its own evaluation, and health-conscious eaters can learn more about their favorite fast foods in the June issue of its *Nutrition Action*.

Among the worst: McDonald's Ham Biscuit, which has 1,949 mg. of sodium — one of the highest sodium levels of all the fast foods examined; Roy Rogers Crescent Sandwich with Sausage, which has 1,289 mg. of sodium and the equivalent of 7.7 pats of butter in a single serving; Hardee's Bacon Cheeseburger, with 1,074 mg. of sodium and the equivalent of 11.1 pats of butter; and Wendy's cheese-stuffed potato, with 450 mg. of sodium and the equivalent of 9 pats of butter. CSPI calls Wendy's Triple Cheeseburger "The Coronary Bypass Special."

But, CSPI adds, Wendy's recently has



launched a new "light" menu, an entire meal plan for people who "watch their intake of calories, sugar, sodium, fat and cholesterol." Wendy's thus made its list of the best in fast foods, along with Long John Silver's Baked Fish (151 calories instead of 370 for batter-fried), and Jack in the Box's Shrimp Salad (115 calories, less than 8 percent of which comes from fat equal to a quarter pat of butter). Salad dressing is not included in the count.

CSPI also saluted Wendy's reduced calorie dressings, and gave honorable mention to Arby's roasted chicken breast and Wendy's multi-grain buns (you save 25 calories on those. . .).

If you are concerned about additives, would you like to know what contains whole milk, sucrose, nonfat milk solids, corn syrup solids, cream, guar gum, sodium hexametaphosphate, carageenan, salt, imitation vanilla powder, sodium alginate, cellulose gum, dextrose, FD&C yellow dyes Nos. 5 and 6?

A McDonald's vanilla shake, that's what.

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!

You can support CSPI's efforts to "lift the veil of secrecy from fast foods" by writing Senator Howard Metzenbaum (Democrat of Iowa), U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510.

Saving Children's Sight

There is a dramatic connection between Vitamin A deficiency and childhood deaths from malnutrition and infections in developing countries, so says a new report by the House Select Committee on Hunger.

Dr. Alfred Sommer, director of the International Center for Epidemiologic and Preventative Ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins University, estimated that 20 to 35 percent of childhood deaths in the world may be connected to Vitamin A deficiency. He said that "because lack of Vitamin A weakens mucous membranes throughout the body, children who do not get enough of the vitamin are more likely to succumb to respiratory and gastrointestinal illness."

In addition, the Hunger Committee reported, as many as half a million persons throughout the world — again mostly children — are blinded by vitamin A deficiency.

The committee became aware of the devastating effects of vitamin A deficiency while reviewing conditions in feeding camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, where up to 10 percent of the children are at grave risk of becoming irreversibly blind.

Among the most effective treatments for vitamin A deficiency, the select committee says, are capsules containing 200,000 international units of the vitamin — called "golden bullets" — that can be ingested and stored in the liver for up to six months. The capsules are

given to children aged 1 to 5.

Good results have been obtained by fortifying commonly consumed foods, such as margarine and sugar, and by promoting the production of vitamin-A rich vegetables in home and school gardens. The Agency for International Development allocated only \$4.6 million to vitamin A projects between 1975 and 1984. Its funding for this year for nutritional programs was increased by \$10 million, but its budget request for health and nutritional programs for next year is \$100 million below this year, and only \$575,000 has been requested for vitamin A projects.

Representative Mickey Leland

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