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Angels and Vegetables

A Brief History of Food Advice in America

CAN WE EAT OUR WAY TO A BETTER WORLD? A number of recent books have linked ethics and diet, and through a mix of charming prose and charismatic proselytizing writers such as Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, Anna Lappé, Alice Waters, Will Tuttle, and Peter Singer have turned our food choices into moral choices.¹ This proliferation of books means that there must be an audience, people who are seeking to answer the question: What kind of diet is healthy, safe, sustainable, and just?

From this burgeoning interest, one might conclude that we Americans have just awakened to our bad eating habits, that we have finally discovered dietary enlightenment. But, in fact, a look back at American history reveals that the links between social and dietary reform have always been very strong. The United States has long been home to nervous eaters and avid readers, whose concerns about diet mirror larger anxieties about the vast economic and social changes taking place. Food frequently has played a role in movements for moral improvement and social reform.

Why have reformers asked the “What to Eat?” question so hard and for so long? If, as Roland Barthes tells us, national mythologies include food habits, then this longstanding entwining of reformist and digestive sentiment reflects broader national tensions.² By examining reform movements through the stomach, we can discover a gastropolitics that can help explain why the “What to Eat?” question has historically been so important in the United States.³

Before we begin, however, we need to recognize the difference between “What to Eat?” as a public concern and the reality of what people actually eat. Harvey Levenstein’s histories of American eating habits tell very well the story of what the middle class actually ate—which was, for the most part, too much.⁴ The major difference between the advice given and actual eating habits is that, apart from the abstemious few, most Americans have listened to a sermon of moderation while eating away to excess. These overeaters made up for their indulgences in all sorts of disturbing ways: mercury pills, intestinal operations, strange diets, and

constant enemas—as we learn from the early nineteenth-century woman who testified that, when running from her burning home, she made sure to take one thing: her Cascade enema bag. That tells us a lot.⁵

Why do middle-class Americans love to read advice about how to eat while mostly ignoring it? Why do abstemious disciplinarians fill their readers with so much hope but so little fulfillment? And what is it about the United States as a nation that commits itself to present excess while placing great hope in future moderation?

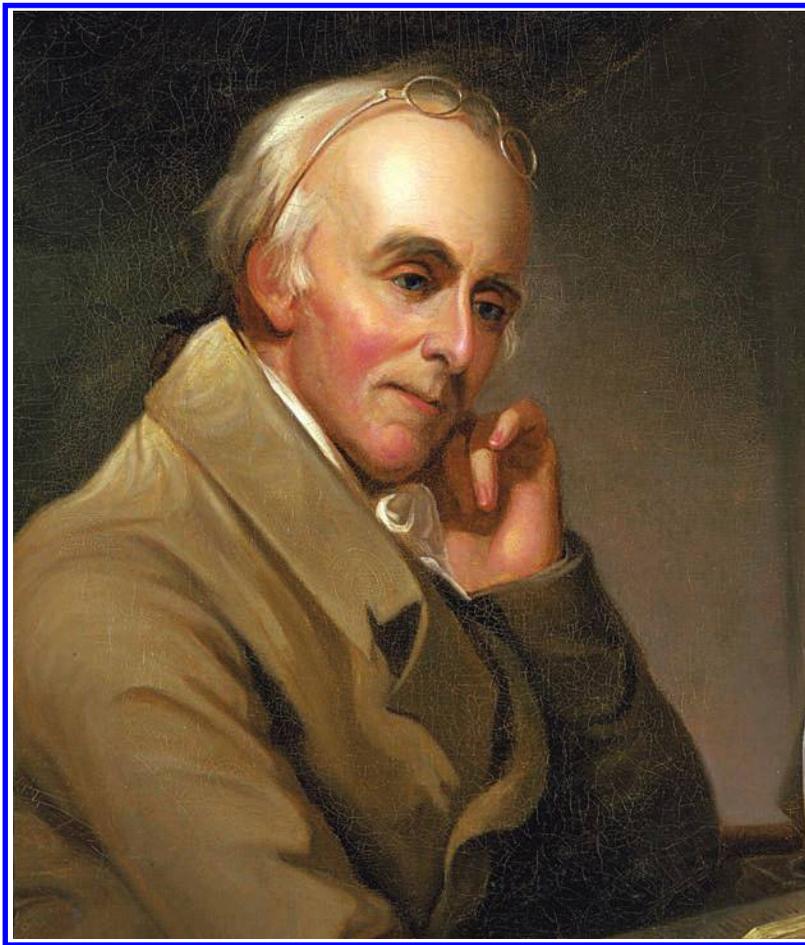
Because we have lost our faith in both religion and science as guides to eating, we rely on popular writers to steer us through a welter of confusing and contradictory information.

The history of food advice in the United States shows that the search for a perfect diet parallels a search for moral authority. This authority has changed over time, but as the following historical vignettes show, it has generally had two aspects: an invisible messenger, from angels to germs to vitamins; and a mediator, from preacher to scientist, who sees himself or herself as the medium, the popular evangelizer. Because dietary reform is also social reform, the invisible messenger—

Right: *Albrecht Dürer*, Saint John devours the book God presented him. *Woodcut from The Revelation of St. John* (Rev. x, 1–5, 8–10), 1498.

BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS, FRANCE. BRIDGEMAN-GIRAUDON/ART RESOURCE, NY.





whether angels, calories, or vitamins—tells us a lot about the fraught issues of the time.

Angels

In the early nineteenth century, New Englanders who had recently settled the frontier extending from western Massachusetts through upstate New York and west to Ohio found the woods to be teeming with angels. The inhabitants of this region reported being in constant conversation with the divine, and a surprising number of these conversations were about diet. In Palmyra, New York, for example, the Angel Moroni first appeared to John Smith. Only a few years after receiving the golden tablets containing the Book of Mormon, Smith received “The Word of Wisdom,” a set of recommendations about healthy living, including abstinence from coffee, tea, and alcohol and the “sparing” use of meat. But not only Mormons received dietary advice from on high. Whether through angelic visitations, inspirational visions, or Biblical interpretation, new prophets rose to evangelize among those suffering from the sins of digestive, moral, and social debility.

Yet, even in the early nineteenth century the intertwining of diet and reform was not new. In 1772 patriot doctor

Above: *Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin Rush (after Thomas Sully), 1818.*

COURTESY OF INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Benjamin Rush published his advice on healthy living, advising a (now-familiar) moderation in spirits, a mostly vegetable diet, and adequate exercise.⁶ Rush exemplified the link between digestive and social concerns. Besides assisting in the birth of many social movements—The Declaration of Independence (he was a signer), psychiatry (his face is on the seal of the American Psychiatric Association), Thomas Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* (he suggested the title),⁷ and abolition (he was one of the founders)—he was also a founder of the temperance movement. In his “Inquiry into Effects of Spiritous Liquors,” Rush listed beverages from good to bad, with water and buttermilk at the top, wine in the middle, and hard liquor at the bottom.⁸ He was famously abstemious himself and did not like to travel to meetings at Dickinson College (which he had helped found), because there were no meals suitable to his vegetables-and-milk diet in the taverns along the way.⁹

To early republicans like Rush, the United States, as a land free of aristocratic authority, seemed like the place God intended for his Kingdom on Earth, and a heavenly diet seemed to fulfill part of this promise. Often both

scientifically inclined and divinely inspired, these early social reformers worked without the benefit of analytical method, but with faith in God's design, leading them to make a connection between concerns over American digestion and the promise of moral improvement.

Rush typified this American optimism, to a fault. Even the blackness of African Americans, he believed, was an illness that could be cured by associating with whites of good character.¹⁰ Patience and discipline could overcome any adversity, if only the individual was deserving.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, this optimism had become a religious crusade, as the new northern middle class mixed secular self-making and divine inspiration in a movement known as The Second Great Awakening. Moving away from the Puritan idea of life as fate and the elite as the elect, people aspired to a more democratic vision of the world as malleable in human hands. As de Tocqueville so aptly described, this belief in individual self-making both drove and debilitated democracy. The idea that life is what you make of it led both to hope in the creation of a new world and alienation from that world as individuals saw how little ability they had to control anything. One solution was to link personal revelation with self-control, and proselytizers who claimed that world-betterment came through self-betterment found a ready audience. Charles Grandison Finney, the preacher most often associated with The Second Great Awakening, traveled throughout upstate New York, challenging the old Calvinist notions of predestination and fate and playing on people's anxieties to preach a new American optimism about world-making and self-making. Finney termed the region the "Burned-Over District" due to the many fires of redemption burning so brightly there.

Rochester, New York, had become the country's first boomtown following the completion of the Erie Canal. Only a few blocks away from the Rochester Presbyterian church where Finney preached stood the city's flourmills, including one that produced the graham flour invented by Sylvester Graham.¹¹ Like Finney, Graham was an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church and an itinerant proselytizer, but he preached the salvation of health reform. Where Finney sought to replace predestination with the idea that humans could perfect themselves and their world, Graham preached the creation of a perfected life through abstention from the evils of meat, spices, fat, and sex (especially the so-called solitary vice). His invention of the graham cracker was meant to deliver the public from the evils of white bread.¹² If Finney's self-made salvation pointed to a moral politics of personal life, Graham added a politics of ingestion. He was the country's first true health prophet.

Rochester stood at the center of the new politics that merged the redemption of one's self and one's world. By the 1840s, Rochester revivalists had formed active temperance, abolition, charitable, and "moral reform" societies, as well as vanguard suffrage movements. It is no accident that the city was home to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and that Frederick Douglass moved there in the 1840s to found his newspaper, *The North Star*. As a boomtown, Rochester attracted fortune-seekers, and throughout the mid-nineteenth century financial instability sent nearly a third of the middle class careening back and forth between comfort and financial struggle,¹³ even as industrialization was breaking apart the old system of patriarchal authority. In addition to financial instability, the middle class felt the sting of a newly nondeferential, and heavily drinking, working class. Under such anxious social conditions, those who survived financial busts "tended to conflate economic standing with moral virtue. Poverty was a personal failing, a secular sin."¹⁴

Middle-class reformers sought to impose a new moral order based on Finney's and Graham's precepts of discipline and self-making.¹⁵ Grahamite boarding houses became a favorite meeting place for abolitionists, temperance advocates, antitobacco militants, and vegetarians. Horace Greeley and William Lloyd Garrison frequently met over the dinner table at New York City's Grahamite boarding house to discuss abolition. Finney even attempted to feed Oberlin College students a Grahamite diet, only to prompt an early example of that long-standing institution, the college protest.

The new self-bettering elite based their authority on "facts" that were a hybrid of reason, romanticism, and revelation. When direct angelic advice was missing, food reformers used a peculiar semi-scientific deism as their method, counting on the Bible to provide them with scientific data about a better future. For example, the early food reformer Robert Hartley "proved" that God intended humans to drink milk because He showed preference for the pastoralist Abel over the ploughman Cain. Armed with this biblical interpretation, Hartley initiated an investigation of city "swill milk" dairies—barns attached to breweries where cows ate waste and lived in horribly unsanitary and cruel conditions. This milk found its way into the stomachs of middle-class babies, who did not do well on this diet, and Hartley crusaded for decades to eliminate these urban dairies.¹⁶ But Hartley's inspiration went beyond biblical interpretation. The opening scene in his biography, written by his son, includes the apparition of an angel who told Hartley to quit his job as a factory manager to pursue an

evangelical life. The leader of the country's first urban food reform movement was inspired from above.

Needless to say, early nineteenth-century America was far from God's Kingdom, especially in the eyes of northerners who saw slaveholding as a sin. Yet, slavery was the food that nourished the nation's economy. Abolitionists grappled with profound injustice at a time when physical digestion was also a national concern. Americans ate so much meat that indigestion and constipation were near-constant worries, with enema bags and mercury pills a daily form of relief for many. The relationship between the physical and national pathologies seemed evident: slavery was like an impassible bolus bringing sickness to the national system, just as meat clogged the body. Meat and slavery became intrinsically bound, and reformers sought to abolish both by linking vegetarianism and abolition.

For William Lloyd Garrison, the parallels between body and nation were clear. In his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, Garrison quoted a verse from the Bible in which "no flesh shall have peace" until the enslaved are "delivered out of the hands of the oppressor." He accused the country's founding fathers of condoning slavery in the Constitution, making it "organic, by granting it certain constitutional guarantees, whereby it should derive nourishment, defense and security from the whole body politic." He believed that the only salvation for the country was to rid it of its pro-slavery Constitution.¹⁷

The hope of perfectibility mixed with despair over slavery led more radical reformers to establish utopian communities throughout the Northeast. Joining earlier Shaker communities and other social experiments were Brook Farm and its more radical offshoot, Fruitlands, in Massachusetts, as well as the Oneida Community in upstate New York. Utopia did not come automatically to these experiments in communal living. Only through highly disciplined behavior could the participants attain moral perfection, which generally included some form of vegetarianism. Brook Farm, a fairly tolerant community, included intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson and the intermittently vegetarian Thoreau as regular guests. Yet even at Brook Farm a special table was reserved for the Grahamites. The more radical communities sought to overturn generally accepted rules of public behavior while subjecting their members to strict discipline. For example, the Oneida Community's rejection of marriage and advocacy of multiple sexual partners necessitated many rules, including strange eugenic strictures about who could make children with whom. Like many utopian communities, Oneida followed vegetarian principles based largely on Graham's.

By the 1840s, even the Shaker communities had become increasingly vegetarian, even though they had been founded on Ann Lee's visions of discipline through celibacy, not diet. The transformation in Shaker dietary practice came about in part through the influence of Graham himself, whose forceful arguments about spicy foods encouraging lust made many lust-fearing Shakers sign on to his diet. However, certain members also reported visions of "Mother Ann" returning in spirit to espouse various dietary restrictions.¹⁸

While the Oneida and Shaker communities boasted several hundred members and lasted many decades, rampant perfectionism in eating at Fruitlands, whose residents never numbered more than ten, ended that communal experiment in less than a year. "The entrance to paradise is still through the strait [*sic*] and narrow gate of self-denial," wrote Bronson Alcott just before founding Fruitlands with Charles Lane in 1843. The entrance to Fruitlands was narrow, indeed, despite its lofty goals. Many of the stories told about the community have to do with food, demonstrating the links between social reform and the stomach. In her essay on Fruitlands, "Transcendental Wild Oats," Bronson Alcott's daughter, Louisa May Alcott, describes how one resident was banished for eating fish.¹⁹ Another young man, Isaac Hecker, wrote in his diary about how his two-week experience at Fruitlands confirmed his commitment to live on bread, fruit, and nuts. In his twenties at the time, Hecker suffered from multiple gastric, angelic, and romantic visitations that a simple diet seemed to relieve.²⁰ He later went on to found the Paulist Fathers, a Catholic sect devoted to converting all of the United States to Catholicism.

Given these links between food and morality, it is not surprising that angels ran amok among the food reformers. Finney himself never claimed to have seen an angel, but he did see a "bright light" in 1829 that prompted him to take up the life of a preacher. Ellen G. White combined Grahamite food prohibitions with angelic visions to come up with the spiritual and ingestive foundations of the Seventh Day Adventists: the avoidance of meat, alcohol, caffeine, tobacco, salt, stuffy rooms, and doctors.²¹ Originally a follower of millenarian William Miller, who predicted the end of the world in 1844, White turned her fellow Millerites away from the apocalypse and toward temperate living and Sabbatarianism after "The Great Disappointment" that took place when the world failed to end.

Although attention to health and diet reform largely abated during the Civil War, Ellen G. White was an exception. Her first vision of health reform came during the Battle of Vicksburg, which she described in an edition of her collected visions, *Spiritual Gifts*, published during Sherman's

march to the sea. Ellen G. White ruptured the connections among spirituality, vegetarianism, and abolitionism. For her, intemperance, not war, was the greatest human downfall. God's will was not victory over slavery for the creation of a better world here on Earth, but victory over one's bodily habits as preparation for the world beyond.²² However, most of the American public read this break between personal discipline and national responsibility in a different way: with the end of the Civil War, consumption, not denial, became the sign of national belonging.

Germ and Calories

After the Civil War, rising industry and rising incomes changed the country's gastropolitics. Rather than maintaining their status through abstemious discipline, the Gilded Age middle class embraced the "spirit of gluttony" that had so frustrated Graham a few decades earlier. Workers also wanted more: more leisure time, higher wages, more consumer goods, and especially more meat. Threatened by worker demands, the middle class focused on protection rather than digestion. The antebellum anxiety about how to digest the bolus of slavery became a struggle over the right to consume the new wealth, and the growth of scientific ideas about purity and sanitation gave the middle class a new way to signify their superior status as experts leading society to a purer and cleaner life. As models of this life, they were deserving of more. If germs didn't exist, the turn-of-the-century bourgeoisie would have had to invent them. Germs provided the vocabulary for the creation of status.²³

Therefore, the dynamics among moral, social, and dietary worth shifted as middle-class reformers focused on disciplining that which was undeserving and outside: the people and germs that might invade and threaten the elite's increasingly comfortable way of life. The key question in this new gastropolitics of nation and body concerned what to let pass over bodily, class, and national borders. Discussions of bodily protection from contagion and of national protection from immigrants reflected one another all too closely²⁴ as the question of "What to eat?" became increasingly tied up with ideas of native superiority. Middle-class reformers moved from religion to contagion, deploying race as a tool in their efforts to sanitize the rapidly growing cities.²⁵ Germs, like angels, were not visible to the naked eye. They, therefore, needed the intervention of humans with a special gift of vision. In this case, the gift was expertise in the guise of science.

A new breed of nutrition professionals such as W.O. Atwater offered the middle class a vocabulary to justify their own deservingness by delegitimizing workers' demands

for more. An academic, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) official, and popular writer, Atwater relied on a new invisible messenger: the calorie. Having trained in Europe, where German scientists first discovered how to measure calories, Atwater found that American workers consumed both more protein and more calories than German workers. He assumed this was due to the Americans' greater activity—that they worked harder—but he also wrongly attributed this fact to a love of rich foods on the part of the country's working classes. Atwater described his research as "a pecuniary economy of food," the discovery of how much workers needed to be fed to perform work: "How much protein, fats, and carbohydrates does the average man, with a moderate amount of manual work to do, require in a day's food?"²⁶

Atwater's answer was, generally, much less than the average man tended to eat, in terms of both calories and cost. The fact that workers in some nations got by on fewer calories was not a sign of malnourishment; rather, it meant that American workers ate too much. Atwater, therefore, castigated workers, particularly those who ate a lot of meat, for insisting on higher-quality foods than they could afford. One of his popular articles began with the story of a coal miner who "was innocently committing an immense economical and hygienic blunder [through his] conceit...that there is some mysterious virtue in those kinds of food that have the most delicate appearance and flavor and the highest price...and that to economize by using anything inferior would be a sacrifice of both dignity and principle." Pecuniary economy focused on fueling the worker's body as an efficient machine. "The steam-engine gets its power from fuel; the body does the same,"²⁷ Atwater wrote, and both should do so as cheaply as possible.

Behind this machine metaphor lay a struggle between those who argued for a better society through efficiency and workers who sought betterment through a redistribution of wages. Middle-class professionals such as Atwater formed a kind of protective barrier between working-class demands and the industrialists besieged by them. As the working class demanded higher wages, nutritionists and other new professionals such as home economists deployed science and designed counter-arguments to show how efficiency in the factory and at home could maintain production at current worker income. Using the recently discovered science of calories and experiments in animal feeding, the new experts found that the American diet contained just about too much of everything and at too high a cost.

The working class responded by defending its right to eat meat, as a privilege of white citizenship. The locus of

this conflict became race, specifically the Chinese. In a report supporting the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, titled “Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood vs. Asiatic Coolieism, Which will Survive?,”²⁸ Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) expressed the union’s views on Chinese immigration in terms of ingestion: “He underbids all white labor and ruthlessly takes its place and will go on doing so until the white laborer comes down to the scanty food and half-civilized habits of the Chinaman.”²⁹ The newly organized and newly vocal working class saw Chinese immigration as an attack on their meat-centered diet. White working-class men deployed nativist anti-Chinese arguments in their demands for a living wage that would support their meat-eating. Rejecting nutritionists’ arguments that a meat-heavy diet was bad for them, the representatives of the newly established workers’ organizations struck back, on behalf of meat and of native working-class jobs.

Gompers exemplified the overlap between racial nativism and working-class demands. White workers, especially in California, the epicenter of Chinese immigration, “routinely attempted to create, extend, or preserve their social position against the perceived threat that the Chinese posed to their superordinate status.”³⁰ In “Meat vs. Rice,” Gompers merged the white working-class fear of labor competition with the middle-class fear of contagion, arguing in both cases for the exclusion of Chinese immigrants.³¹ Although the report’s title indicates a defense of the workers’ meat diet, much of the text plays on fears of contagion by describing purported increases in crime and disease in Chinese residential areas. The white working class waged their fight for the right to calories by inciting fear of the germs and vice attributed to this immigrant population.

Immigration, therefore, created a new gastropolitics. From the AFL perspective, the calorie-counting nutritionists were trying to make American workers more like the immigrant workers competing for their jobs by urging them to live a lesser and degraded “coolie” rice-eating life. Unlike the utopian middle-class Grahamites who believed that eating abstemiously could bring God’s perfection to Earth, late nineteenth-century American workers regarded a meatless diet as the sort of meager provisioning employers continually sought to impose. The argument about Chinese diet created a situation in which “the ability [of the Chinese] to subsist and thrive under conditions that would mean starvation and suicide to the cheapest worker of Europe” points to an established social agreement about an American standard of living that was better than that in China, or even in Europe. The ideal of the “consumer citizen,” therefore, contained a narrative of race in which the white worker

performed the role of consumer, and a narrative of diet in which eating more than was necessary, especially more meat, became a sign of white citizenship.³²

Vitamins

By World War I, nutrition professionals had become less interested in promoting the least expensive diet for workers and began to focus instead on the best diet for optimum public health and vitality. Revelations about vitality, which manifest itself through the presence or absence of nutritional deficiencies in the body, came in the form of yet another invisible messenger: the vitamin. Surprisingly, Asian races once again came to the fore as the United States moved onto the world scene. With a need for strong and aggressive bodies to fulfill national imperial ambitions, the politics of ingestion became caught up in questions about the physical strength of the armed forces. Bodies were compared across races and nations, and so it was that the Asian body came to represent nutritional deficiency in American gastropolitical discourse at this time.

Following the establishment of the League of Nations after World War I, scientific collaboration increased. In particular, the League of Nations Mixed Committee of Experts on Nutrition, an international research group, was convened to examine cross-national epidemiological evidence on nutritional deficiency diseases. The committee’s widely read final report discussed nutrition in ways that provided ammunition to national gastropolitical debates by focusing on Asian nutritional deficiency diseases such as beri-beri.³³ The Asian body became the sign of colonial subjection and effeminacy, while the tall, meat-eating and milk-drinking masculine American working-class body signified the superiority of the white diet. This characterization served as justification for white imperial projects in the post-World War I era.³⁴ Colonial non-meat eaters were viewed as conquered peoples, defeated by diet. In their shared disdain for nonwhite races, the working and middle classes found a common identity as members of a powerful nation. This vision of national superiority provided a tool for the working class to argue that they deserved more in their own society, especially once they became the soldiering bodies.

However, the League of Nations’ Nutrition Committee’s characterization of “just rice” as the universal Asian diet was downright incorrect. J.L. Buck, the agronomist husband of writer Pearl Buck, studied the Chinese diet during the 1920s and 1930s and found it adequate in both protein and calories.³⁵ In fact, historians have described the Chinese as “among the best fed populations of Asia” for most of the last

seven centuries.³⁶ By 1900, “China was producing not only calories, but sufficient supplies of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, and other nutrients. The Chinese managed to produce vast quantities of vegetables, beans, and fish, pigs and chickens—enough to provide a basic living for all but the poorest.”³⁷

Nevertheless, Western nutritionists’ accounts of the Chinese diet during this time describe a population on the verge of mass starvation due to lack of vitamins and protein. In addition to meat, milk was key in this discourse. In popular magazine articles, USDA publicist T. Swann Harding and others argued that the Chinese diet was seriously deficient in protein: “The Chinese eat about one seventh as much meat as Americans. Milk is scarce in China and often viewed askance when available. It, therefore, appears that the Chinese have been consistently under-nourished since ancient days.”³⁸ For Swann, lack of milk and malnourishment went hand in hand. More insidious is the use to which Swann put his comparisons of diet, attributing dietary deficiency to a deficiency in national character: “Today, the Chinese is peaceful, sequacious, unprogressive, unenterprising, nonperservering; his stature is poor, his physique bad, his mortality high.”

Such generalizations were based on faulty data. In particular, another report by the League of Nations Nutrition Committee compared milk-drinking and meat-eating cultures to more vegetable-intensive cultures and concluded that the superior health of the African Maasai and Indian Sikhs was attributable to their consumption of milk.³⁹ A recent reanalysis of these studies has shown that the methodologies were faulty in the extreme. The researchers misrepresented their own fieldwork by underreporting the variety in the diet of the nearby vegetarian Kikuyu. Their studies presented the milk-drinking and meat-eating Maasai in “propaganda pieces to show the deficiencies of vegetarianism [and] the benefits of milk.”⁴⁰

The composition of the Nutrition Committee makes clear why all other diets fared badly in comparison to the milk-intensive one. One prominent member was University of Wisconsin nutrition scientist E.V. McCollum, a pioneering twentieth-century nutrition scientist. McCollum’s animal feeding studies had led to the discovery of the first vitamin, Vitamin A, which he isolated from dairy fat. Like Atwater before him, McCollum was a premier purveyor of nutrition advice, writing several books and over a hundred popular articles on good eating. He introduced the idea of “protective foods”—particular foods that protect and maintain complete nutrition in a diet.

McCollum considered milk the ultimate “protective food” and drew a direct parallel between milk-centered

dietary practice and the success of northern Europeans as a race. In his popular and widely read book, *The Newer Nutrition*, he wrote:

The peoples who have made liberal use of milk as a food, have, in contrast [to non-milk drinking peoples], attained greater size, greater longevity, and have been much more successful in the rearing of their young. They have been more aggressive than the non-milk using peoples, and have achieved much greater advancement in literature, science and art. They have developed in a higher degree educational and political systems which offer the greatest opportunity for the individual to develop his powers. Such development has a physiological basis, and there seems every reason to believe that it is fundamentally related to nutrition.⁴¹

McCollum compared this superior diet to that of people “who have employed the leaf of the plant as their sole protective food” and who “are characterized by small stature, relatively short span of life, high infant mortality, and by contended adherence to the employment of the simple mechanical inventions of their forefathers.”⁴²

What cannot be ignored here is McCollum’s close relationship to the dairy industry. The dairy industry trade journal, *Hoard’s Dairymen*, and National Dairy Council publications quoted McCollum’s findings widely to show how various animals thrived on a milk diet and failed to thrive without milk.⁴³ Therefore, the industry’s economic interests played into the racial rhetoric of the day, which portrayed Asians as effeminate and enfeebled and the Chinese “leaf diet” as a cause of degeneracy. Gastropolitical racial exclusions and the politics of health and nutrition were closely linked in the congruence of the ideal American body politic and the ideal American body. It would be many decades before nutritionists began to publicize the benefits of leafy greens such as spinach, which even then could be touted only because a cartoon sailor, Popeye, ate it in a very safe, very American form: boiled and from a tin can.

Armed with the “fact” of American dietary superiority, social workers began to discourage new immigrants from continuing their own food traditions. They instead encouraged an Americanized diet that included fresh milk. This project of assimilation was part of a larger project to perfect American society. A uniform diet eaten by a nutritionally informed public would lead to sound bodies and healthy, well-adjusted children who would grow up to be excellent citizens, more productive workers, and better soldiers.⁴⁴ As food historian Harvey Levenstein has argued, improved nutrition as a solution to the bodily impacts of economic inequality depoliticized the physical impacts of inequality.⁴⁵

SEPTEMBER

What to Eat

MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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Perfect bodies became the way to display American perfection and to hide income disparities.

What to Eat?

As this brief history shows, angels were present at the birth of American food advice, revealing the truth to intermediaries who then evangelized to popular audiences. As time passed, new intermediaries—professionals and scientists—popularized new truths about eating that had been revealed to them through their communication with a different set of invisibilities: germs, calories, and vitamins. It is worth asking, therefore, whether the food advice of today continues this pattern of charismatic proselytizers mediating between invisible messengers and popular audiences.

Today's popular food writers are, in fact, simply the latest in a long line of Americans who have sought to perfect the nation through its stomach. Like the evangelists of old, they write, tour, and preach a gospel that links diet to personal and worldly redemption. Dipping their politics in juices both gastric and spiritual, contemporary popular food writers also address the same audience as those vegetable-counseling angels of the past: the middle class. And because we have lost our faith in both religion and science as guides to eating, we rely on these popular writers to steer us through a welter of confusing and contradictory information.

In his essay "Unhappy Meals," Michael Pollan tries to clear up the confusion of today's dietary advice by boiling down the conflicting prescriptions into a simple recipe: "Eat food...Don't eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food."⁴⁶ Unfortunately, as history has shown, unless we also want to return to our great-great-grandmother's enema bag, that may not be the best advice. In the relatively short history of the United States, numerous revisions to dietary guidelines have been made. Yet, despite whole foods revolutions and new scientific data on fat and nutrients and cholesterol, we still suffer from dietary diseases. Experts continue to offer advice, but we continue to eat badly, by anyone's definition, and we still eat too much.

One of the few differences between today's gastropolitics and that of the past is that being fat is now a sign of poverty rather than of wealth. Workers did not exactly win the fight over wages, but they did win the fight to eat meat, if not in the way they had imagined. Meat became exceedingly cheap, a political bargain between farmers growing grain and workers desiring the tasty marbling of grain-fed beef.

Left: What to Eat, *Book Nineteen, Number Three, September 1905*, printed in Chicago by Pierce Publishing Company.

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In the thoughtful beginning chapters of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan shows how cheap corn, as a sweetener and as an animal feed, satisfied myriad political interests but brought the country's eaters to their fatty knees. By the end of the book, he seeks redemption not in the idea that we can strike new political bargains, but by embracing individual dietary purity, a ritual purge.

Rather than making political choices, we pretend, like the vegetarian abolitionists, that our dietary choices will solve our personal and national problems. At least they will absolve those of us who eat well: because we do not collaborate in wrong eating (industrial farming, genetically modified foods, inhumane animal practices), we are guiltless. Our food choices not only absolve us, they create a semiotics of deservingness, as they did for the vegetarian abolitionists over a century ago. We get the best of this society, but we are not responsible for its shortcomings.

The history of food advice in America reveals that we are a nation that has always tried to eat a perfect diet, but we have always failed. So why do we continue to ask the "What to eat?" question so often and so hard? Perhaps because each era's answer to that question leads to new contradictions and crises, which show up in our bodies. We have historically made diet part of the struggle over social deservingness. When will we, as middle-class strivers, admit to playing this game? When will we admit that inequality is the problem, and that our dietary status games are not a solution, that they in fact contribute to inequality?

Maybe we should stop asking "What to eat?" long enough to consider why we continue to ask the question. Why do we keep looking to proselytizers for simple answers from invisible authorities? Why do we keep striving to prove our guiltlessness and deservingness through food? Why do we continue to think the creation of better bodies will solve our political problems? Perhaps the truth is the other way around: We need to stop trying to solve our social problems through our stomachs and think about the ways in which this type of politics simply justifies current inequalities. Injustice is worth serious attention, but diet won't do the trick. ☉

NOTES

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- Organic Kitchen* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Will Tuttle, *The World Peace Diet: Eating for Spiritual Health and Social Harmony* (New York: Lantern Press, 2005); Peter Singer, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2007). Alice Waters has written forewords to a number of books, such as Sheherezade Goldsmith, *Slice of Organic Life* (London: DK Adult, 2007).
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