

Title: **What To Eat**

Author: **Marion Nestle**

Publisher: **North Point Press**, New York, 2006. Available on amazon.com in paperback for \$10.

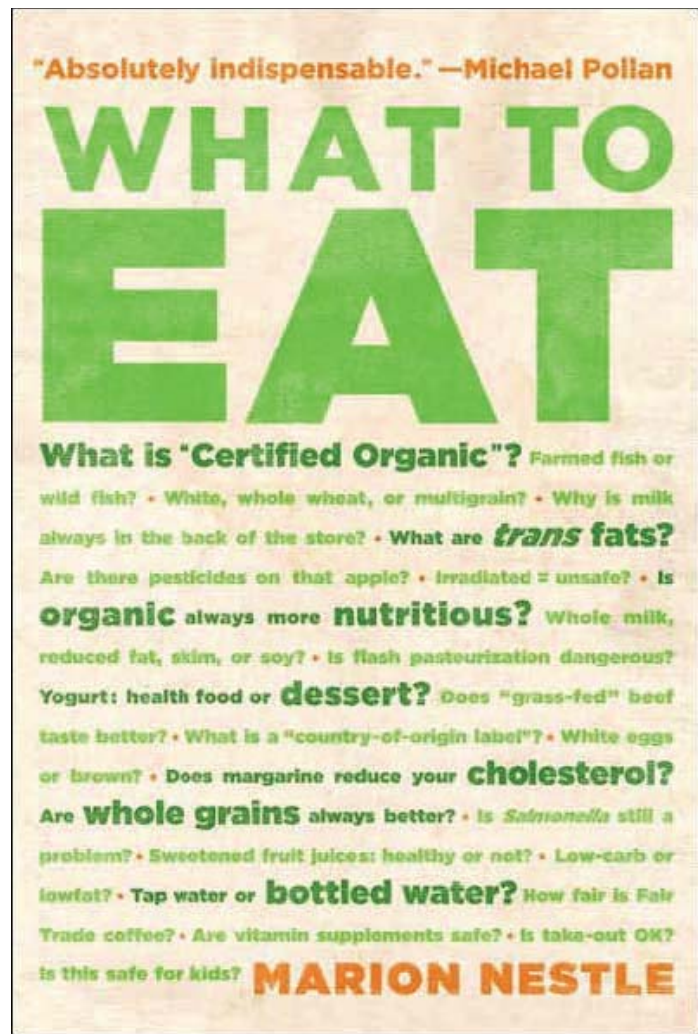
ISBN: **0865477388 (Paperback)**

Marion Nestle is Professor and Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. Having served as a policy advisor to the US government's Department of Health and Human Services and on the scientific advisory committees of the FDA, she is intimately acquainted with the ruthless tactics the five giant food retailers use to ensure shareholder satisfaction, more often than not in contravention of what is known in nutritional science. There is now no doubt that the processed, over-sugared, over-salted, artificially flavored and preservative-loaded foods crowding our supermarket shelves have become a hazard to public health. A hundred years ago, nutrition-related disease was almost exclusively a function of lack of food or toxicity from spoilage, since refrigeration and preservation methods were in their infancy. Today, as Nestle shows in this unique book, with the advent of long-distance transportation and modern preservation methods, supermarket foods are the primary reason we have a diabetes and obesity epidemic; indeed, 60% of Americans are clinically obese.

Nestle's book reveals in systematic detail the labeling and marketing methods employed by the five retail giants which essentially control the bulk of North America's food supply. These methods are deliberately and consciously designed "to be invisible" to the customer, specifically in order to undermine the "informed" part of "informed consent" so that advertising, package and nutritional information on cans and bottles, and the strategic placement of the goods in the store isles make the facts "slip below the radar screen of critical thinking."

Nestle's advisory work for the FDA also gave her an insider's view of how government and corporations interact: it is in her experience basically a client relationship, with the government being serving the client-corporation's interests. She shows how government at all levels furthers corporate profits regardless of the explicitly *known* consequences for public health. (Nestle gave us a hair-curling account of her years in government in her 2003 book "Food Politics", showing how corporations have transformed our government regulatory watchdogs into lap dogs.)

In *What to Eat* she takes the next step, that being to help readers figure out how to protect themselves against corporate-controlled foods. She wants the reader to learn to decode the hidden lies—nutritional information so distorted as to have no relation to scientific fact at all; she wants us to learn how to spot the "hidden persuaders", as Vance Packard called the manipulations of the advertising industry; and she wants us to fine-tune our critical thinking once again. The book is designed such that she takes the reader through the local supermarket—aisle by aisle, shelf by shelf, product by product—and so we learn what the food industry would rather we didn't know or ask about everything that's frozen, canned, bottled, pickled, plastic-packaged, and produced (more or less—usually less) by nature. Being a nutritional scientist she also does a superb job at showing the difference between real science and what masquerades as science in all that fine print on cans and packages. Nestle



often took my breath away with revelations of how the information provided on food products is manipulated to elicit, through the use of color and images, the nurturing instincts or spontaneous appetites or cravings in unwary customers. Low prices, often involving especially Third World exploitation, allow for larger packages which, in turn, increase sales as well as consumption, resulting in more cases of obesity, of course. For example, an 8-ounce can of pop costs \$1.50, while a 2-litre bottle comes to just 75 cents.

There are currently about 320,000 different food and beverage products available, and even a small supermarket will carry about 30,000 items. The five major corporations generate about \$350 billion in sales annually and a profit of about \$3.5 billion. Wal-Mart alone rakes in \$64 billion in sales from produce, about 1/4 of its total annual sales. In order to fan the fires for increased demand, sophisticated research methods are employed which can be accurately verified subsequently by survey comparisons of the actual items bought. This is possible because the check-out scanners contain the information of what any of us last bought.

Nestle explains that supermarket isles are in fact real estate measured and rented in linear feet and then organized to fit the customers' age: the sugary cereals are on eye-level with the little kids, the products with all sorts of snazzy health claims and scientific gobbledegook are at 60 inches above ground to

ensure that adults can read the packaging with or without glasses; the potentially really healthy stuff is at the top for which astute and educated shoppers have to reach, because they really know what they want, being presumably fit enough to do so.

As for advertising, revving up the recently flagging sales of Coca Cola products, for example, involves marketing campaigns of about \$600 million; just \$ 11 million were spent on promoting a single item, namely Kraft/Altria's candy called Crème Savers. That, Nestle tells us, is five times as much as the US government ever spent on their campaign to promote eating more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Especially helpful is the way in which Nestle unravels the claims for "natural" as opposed to "certified organic", the politics and science behind irradiation, the difference between farmed and wild fish, the health hype involving margarines, the socially irresponsible dirt hidden behind standard coffees and teas, as opposed to fair trade products—indeed, she exhaustively discusses all those topics about which nutrition and environment conscious people would like to get reliable information.

The two key questions Nestle poses and answers are first: "Who benefits?" and second, "What are the basic principles of healthy diets?" The answer to the first is of course the theme of the book, and that is what teaches the reader that most of the

time the customer is definitely not the one who benefits. The answer to the second question Nestle gives us is: "Eat less, move more, eat lots of fruit and vegetables."

Canada's former chief drug regulator-turned-health activist, Dr. Michelle Brill-Edwards, formulated the great phrase "speaking truth to power" to describe what an activist does. Nestle recently did just that rather spectacularly when she was invited to the 2005 World Trade Organization meeting in Davos. There she socked it to the food industry such that I cheered through that last chapter. She ends the book describing what she imagines the food industry might do instead of what it actually does – and how such a change from greed to quality would affect world health. Nestle writes: "The choices you make about food are as much about the kind of world you want to live in as they are about what to have for dinner. Food choices are about your future and that of your children. They are about nothing less than democracy in action."

What To Eat is available in a hard cover edition as well as a handy paperback version which fits into a shopping bag and ought to be at hand as a trustworthy guide whenever one enters a supermarket.

Helke Ferrie is a medical science writer and publisher who lives in Caledon, Ontario. Contacts: helke@simpatico.ca; visit www.kospublishing.com