

## Vote With Your Fork

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Investigative Reporter Pam Killeen Interviews Nutritionist Marion Nestle, PhD

From February 3rd - 5th, 2005, the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) held their 14th annual conference, Reclaiming Health: Nourishing our Farms and Families, Farming for the Future, 2005 at Penn State, State College, PA. Marion Nestle, PhD was one of the keynote speakers who presented her observations about the current state of the food industry. Marion Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, a department she chaired for 15 years. Her degrees include a PhD in molecular biology and an M.P.H. in public health nutrition, both from the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of "Food Politics" (2002) and "Safe Food" (2003), both from University of California Press.

As a consumer I have often wondered how processed food companies get away with selling "junk", sugar-laden cereals to our children. I finally heard the answer to my question when I listened to Dr. Nestle's keynote address at the recent Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture conference. Her most poignant remarks had to do with explaining how companies have been getting away with selling these cereals to our children. According to Dr. Nestle:

"They have formed an alliance that has joined for the right to advertise to children and their purpose is to defend the industry's first amendment right to advertise to children and to promote the industry's willingness to police themselves voluntarily. We know that isn't going to work. I have trouble with this first amendment argument. I imagine back to our forefathers who wrote the first amendment sitting around a table saying, "how are we going to guarantee freedom of speech for people who have diverse religious beliefs?" They were NOT sitting around that table saying, "how can we defend the right of makers of junky cereals to market their products to kids?" I think we have a real problem with this. Some lawyers should take a look at the first amendment and start using it for what it was for."

During her keynote address, Dr. Nestle pointed out that the food companies are now "afraid that they may have to have warning labels on their foods, jut like cigarette companies have on their cigarettes. They are also worried that their foods will end up in sections or aisles entitled "Junk Food"." I find it shocking that companies, like General Mills, are in complicity with the American Heart Association who endorses sugar-laden cereals like "Count Chocula". According to Dr. Nestle, cereals like this "don't even pretend to be healthy." She told the audience that she had recently attended a forum where she had been yelled at by a very high official at General Mills who said it "didn't matter whether the cereals were healthy or not, and that the whole point of serving these breakfast cereals was to encourage children to drink milk." It seems frightening that an official at General Mills doesn't seem to care whether or not a cereal is healthy! Whatever happened to a traditional, wholesome breakfast of eggs and/or porridge? My golden rule is to choose nutrient-dense whole foods and avoid foods that have been subjected to a high heat process (such as boxed cereals, crackers and chips).

Consumers will be able to stop the influx of highly processed foods from penetrating the marketplace if they make some drastic changes with their shopping habits. It is becoming more evident that consumers need to avoid highly processed foods. Health conscious consumers would do well to heed Dr. Nestle's very clear advice: "take personal responsibility by voting with our forks."

I had the pleasure of spending some time asking Dr. Nestle a few more questions about her research:

**Pam: In the beginning of your presentation, you seemed apologetic for taking so long in**

**your career to realize that agriculture actually has something to do with nutrition. Can you comment on this realization?**

Dr. Nestle: It was a slow growing realization that if you want to understand how people are eating, you need to understand how the food is produced and what agricultural pressures are on the food system. The more I learn about agriculture, the more important I think it is. I have some regrets that I didn't study agricultural economics when I was in college. I think this is an essential subject for nutritionists to study.

**Pam: That's an amazing revelation. I hope that more people gain this same insight as more is being done to do research in this area. When visitors come to this country, they are appalled by the American diet. What has been the cause of having such a terrible food supply today?**

Dr. Nestle: I don't mean to make it sound like a national conspiracy. I think it's collateral damage from having a food supply that has too much food in it. I know it seems shocking to say that's there's too much food in the food supply but in fact we have 3,900 calories available for every man woman and child. That's twice the average need. It's just not distributed equitably. This much food makes the industry very competitive. It isn't that food companies are sitting around a table saying, "how can we make Americans fat?" They're sitting around a table saying, "how can we sell our foods in a hugely competitive market?"

**Pam: Cereal companies are using the first amendment in order to be able to use potentially dangerous/irresponsible claims on their products.**

Dr. Nestle: Again, it's a question of trying to sell food. If you're a food company executive and you've got a product you want to market, you want people to think it's healthy, you want people to think it's good for them, and you want to distinguish your product from everybody else's in your category. I always show a lot of pictures of breakfast cereals because I think if you want to understand what's going on in the food marketplace, you have to look at breakfast cereals. They are amazing! They have claims that they have whole grains or all those vitamins. Health claims appeal to a class of consumers who care about their health and want to do something for their health or their child's health. I've seen parents pulling these cereals off the shelf saying that, "it's better than the ones that don't have vitamins or whole grains." What they don't take into account is that the products are still sugary cereals - cookies, really and not something you want your children to be eating.

**Pam: You called these foods "cookies" and not something that should be considered a main meal.**

Dr. Nestle: A sugary breakfast cereal is a cookie. Some of them even advertise themselves as tasting like cookies or having candies added. Go look at children's breakfast cereals. Practically every single one of them has marshmallows or chocolate bits or candy. They are cookies with added candy, sugar and flour-they are desserts in disguise.

**Pam: You seem shocked that the American Heart Association is endorsing these sugar-laden cereals.**

Dr. Nestle: The AHA really needs to re-think its policies on endorsements. They endorse on food products that are low in fat. The food companies pay the AHA for their logo. The AHA makes money by allowing these food companies to use their logo. I keep hoping they will re-think their criteria and broaden them. It is easy to argue that taking in too many calories from sugars makes people eat more. If you eat more, you get fatter. If you're fatter, you raise your risk for heart disease. I hope that at some point, they'll realize they have to stop doing these endorsements.

**Pam: I thought it was interesting that you categorize obesity as a food safety issue. You emphasized education as a solution if we expect to see a reduction in obesity.**

Dr. Nestle: If you want to get your weight under control, you have to eat less, move more, and eat fewer junk foods. These things can be so hard to do in our current food environment. I don't in any way want to minimize how hard it is for people to lose weight because you're constantly being bombarded by foods. It is hard to eat well in a society where there are so many sources that are encouraging you to eat more, not less. It becomes a public health problem of staggering proportions and nobody really knows what to do about it because eating less is bad for business.

**Pam: Do you really think that Kraft will decrease the amount of advertising for children?**

Dr. Nestle: Kraft says they're not going to advertise any of their products to children under the age of 12. It used to be under the age of 6, so now they are upping it to 12. But they are not reducing the amount of money they are spending on advertising to that demographic, according to Advertising Age. We have to wait and see whether they change the mix of advertising so that they are advertising more of their healthier products than their "junkier" ones. Kraft is owned by Altria, which also owns Philip Morris. It has to grow and meet its quarterly Wall Street targets. If it does not, Altria will surely demand that Kraft find another way to sell more products. Kraft made billion in sales last year, but that's not enough. They have to keep growing.

**Pam: Can you tell us about the Olestra story?**

Dr. Nestle: Olestra is an old story. It is on the market in products like WOW potato chips and a few others. You have to look hard in the potato chip section of the grocery store to find it because it looks like any other kind. It has a little logo saying Olean. Olestra is an artificial fat that is not digested by the body. The snacks have about half of the regular calories. It acts like mineral oil and you can't eat too much of it before running into problems (such as leakage). Procter & Gamble spent nearly 30 years trying to get it approved. The market has been disappointing, but it has a small niche.

**Pam: In your book, you say that food companies emphasize the health benefits in order to hide adverse effects. Are food companies unethically lopsided in focusing on the health benefits while they disregard the adverse effects?**

Dr. Nestle: Food companies are in business and they need to be understood as a business and like any other business, their job is to sell food.

**Pam: They're hiring a lot of people and a lot of people are relying on income from working for the food companies. What are your predictions surrounding the new food pyramid?**

Dr. Nestle: My guess is that there'll be significant changes from the pyramid we have now because there have been so many criticisms of it. The public relations firm that's been hired to do the design came up with an alternative design. I'm not sure what it will be but I will be surprised if the pyramid remains.

**Pam: Do you have any comments on the new Food Guidelines? In your presentation, you mentioned that they were somewhat unintelligible.**

Dr. Nestle: The dietary guidelines for Americans are basically gone. We used to have simple precepts like avoid too much sugar or eat more your fruits and vegetables. Now they are so complicated that nobody can understand them. There are some good things in the new food guidelines, but you have to read between the lines to see them.

**Pam: I really appreciate the time you have spent with me and encourage people to buy**

**your books, "Food Politics" and "Safe Food". Do you have a website?**

Dr. Nestle: My website is: [www.foodpolitics.com](http://www.foodpolitics.com). It's a little stale, but I'm working on it.

**Pam: Any last suggestions as to how Americans can spruce up their diets?**

Dr. Nestle: Eat well, eat locally.

**Pam: Thank you, Dr. Nestle.**