Organic foods might reduce cancer risk, says new study

I never cease to be amazed by how angry some people get about organic foods.

- They complain about its higher prices (organics cost more to produce).
- They complain about its implicit—no, explicit—critique of conventional farming methods (organics use fewer toxic pesticides, are kinder to soil, and are more sustainable).
- They complain that organics exclude GMOs (this is bad for the GMO business).
- They complain about research showing the benefits of organics.

This last complaint brings me to the study on organic food and cancer just published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

This is an observational study of nearly 70,000 people who were asked to report their level of consumption of organic foods and were then monitored for cancer for 7 years.

The results: those who reported consuming the highest levels of organic foods had the lowest risk of developing cancer during that period.

For non-Hodgkin lymphoma, the cancer most associated with exposure to herbicides and pesticides used in conventional agriculture and GMO production, the observed reduction in risk was a whopping 86%.

An accompanying editorial lists the limitations of the study; the dietary intake data were self-reported, the questionnaire wasn’t validated, blood levels of pesticides and herbicides were not measured.

So yes, more research—perhaps much more research—is needed to confirm these observations before anything can be said about whether organics are really protective against cancer.

But in the meantime, there’s no harm in eating organic foods and these foods have demonstrable environmental benefits.

Choosing them means voting for food production systems that are better for the environment—and might be better for health as well.

This makes organics a good bet and worth the premium price if you can afford it.

Here’s what the *New York Times* says about this study.
Now published: my new book about how food company sponsorship of nutrition research affects public health. For information about the book—blurs, reviews, tweets, how to get—click here.

For my public speaking engagements about the book, click here.

If you are in New York, join the launch party at NYU today, 5:00 p.m., Bobst Library 3rd floor. RSVP here.

And here are some early reviews:


Oct 23  Nestle M. Superfoods are a marketing ploy (excerpt). The Atlantic.

Oct 22  Àlex Pérez. Una verdad desagradable no vende. ElPiscolabis (Spain).


Oct 2  Science Magazine. Cyan James, “A nutrition expert aims a critical eye at the research and marketing practices of food companies.”

Tomorrow: Unsavory Truth is out

Tomorrow is the official publication date for Unsavory Truth. Here’s the launch invitation.
Weekend reading: The Poison Squad


I already had received my copy of this book when Felicity Lawrence reviewed it in Nature along with my new book, Unsavory Truth. What I loved about the review was Lawrence’s comment that I “could make a fair claim to [Harvey] Wiley’s mantle today…The book is a remorseless dissection of the corruption of science by industry.”

But enough about me. Blum’s book is a clear, wonderfully written account of the political opposition faced by Harvey Washington Wiley, the head of the USDA’s Bureau of Chemistry (later, the FDA) who relentlessly lobbied his bosses, presidents, and the public to insist that food companies produce food safely.

If you cannot understand why there are still so many outbreaks of foodborne illness and why so many foods are still having to be recalled, this book is a revelation.

Blum, who directs the Knight Science Journalism program at MIT, is terrific at explaining the complex politics that affected Wiley’s work.

I particularly appreciated her chapter on the food safety laws passed in 1906. Their passage came about, in part, as a result of Upton Sinclair’s publication of The Jungle, a book that exposed the horribly unsanitary and dangerous conditions of the Chicago stockyards.

Try to imagine something like this happening today: the book came out early in January. By July, Congress had passed food safety laws. Blum’s chapter explains how that happened. Those events were news to me.

Much else in the book will also be news, even to people who follow food safety issues closely—the intensity of the opposition to everything that Wiley was trying to do.

Wiley was watching out for the disenfranchised, and in moral terms:

> Wiley added that food quality and safety represented not only good science but also moral decision-making. The wealthy, he pointed out, could easily afford fresh food and well-made condiments. The trade in cheap, chemically enhanced imitations catered to the poor. If the country could work to standardize good food, then it also would be promoting good health for all. “Whenever a food is debased in order to make it cheap, the laboring man pays more for any given nourishment than the rich man does who buys the pure food,” he pointed out. [p. 195]

We need leadership like that today.

I especially like the way Blum ends the book:

> Of we are to continue moving in a direction that preserves what's best in this country, we need not romanticize the past but we must learn from what it tells us about our earlier mistakes. The people who fought to correct those long-ago errors still have lessons to share. The story of Harvey Washington Wiley, at his fierce and fearless best, should remind us that such crusaders are necessary in the fight. That the fight for consumer
Do kids need foods just for them? Hint: not after infancy

This is a collection of articles from the industry newsletter, FoodNavigator.com, about marketing foods to kids—kids’ food.

Really, kids would be much better off eating the healthy foods their parents eat. They don’t need food aimed just at them. Much of this is about selling products to busy parents. Here’s how companies do it.

- **FOOD FOR KIDS: Why do so many kids have food allergies, and what can we do about it?**: The prevalence of food allergies has increased dramatically over the last 25 years, with infants and children most severely affected. But why? Is it changes in gut bacteria? The so-called ‘hygiene hypothesis’? The rising use of antibiotics? Is prevalence, and in some cases severity, increasing? What do we know, what don’t we know (yet), and what are the next steps in addressing the problem?.. Read

- **FOOD FOR KIDS Vox Pop: Parents share their take on food for kids**: Parents to young kids face many competing demands for their time. So is sitting down to dinner together a realistic option seven days a week? Is it a daily struggle to get kids to eat healthy?.. Watch now

- **FOOD FOR KIDS: A chat with child nutritionists**: With kids spending so much of their day in school while also being heavily influenced by their parents’ eating habits, how can we get kids to make healthy food and beverage choices?.. Watch now

- **FOOD FOR KIDS: Sitting down with Nurture Life**: The ideal situation for families with young children is a sit-down dinner seven days a week, but in many cases that’s just not realistic, says co-founder of Nurture Life Jennifer Chow… Watch now

- **FOOD FOR KIDS: How can you earn professional recommendations for your healthy food brand?** ‘Influencers’ are increasingly sought after by brands looking to connect with their target audience via a trusted intermediary, and pediatricians are about as trusted as they come if you’re trying to reach parents of young children. So how can you put your brand at the center of conversations between pediatric professionals and millennial moms and dads?.. Read

- **FOOD FOR KIDS: What’s the connection between infant gut bacteria and health outcomes later in life?** Babies born in the USA today don’t have the same microbiome as those born 100 years ago, a seemingly innocuous discovery that could prove to be a game-changer in pediatrics, claims one California-based company on a mission to rejuvenate the ‘dysbiotic’ American gut… Read

- **Square Baby promises a ‘foolproof way to give your baby 100% daily nutrition’**: If not everyone is convinced of the viability of the direct to consumer (D2C) meal kit delivery business, the economics of the subscription model for baby food are much more appealing, claims Square Baby, one of a new wave of D2C brands targeting babies, or more accurately, their stressed and exhausted parents… Read

- **$6.7M investment will help RETHINK Brands raise awareness of its kids’ water packed in juice boxes**: With the help of a $6.7 million investment led by AccelFoods, the founders of boxed water company RETHINK Brands hope to change how more people think about water and the beverages they send with their children to school, sports practice and other events… Read

- **GoGo SqueeZ targets tweens with new BlastZ fruit pouches**: BlastZ – the latest innovation from GoGo squeeZ – is designed to attract new consumers to the burgeoning fruit squeezers category by appealing to kids that have outgrown apple sauce but are still looking for a convenient fruit snack, says associate brand manager Dennis Katnelse… Read

The soda industry is having trouble meeting calorie targets

In 2014, the soda industry (American Beverage Industry, Coke, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper) and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (founded by the American Heart...
Association and the Clinton Foundation) pledged to reduce calories in its beverages as a means to help with weight control. The pledge was to reduce calories in sugary drinks by 20% by 2025.

At the moment, achievement of this goal seems unlikely according to a report by the American Beverage Association and the Alliance.

The overall summary: a 3 (!) calorie per person per day reduction since 2014.

Plotting the data this way makes the change seem significant, but this industry has a long way to go.

Why isn’t it doing better? The simple answer: sugary drinks sell and are highly profitable.

The report explains the trends:

- A decline in consumption of carbonated soft drinks, but an increase in consumption of sugary sports drinks, energy drinks, and ready-to-drink teas and coffees.
- A decline in retail sales of carbonated soft drinks, but an increase in calories from fountain drinks and food service.
- An increase in sales of smaller-size containers, but also an increase in sales of larger containers.

The report does not give advertising figures.

I’d like to know which products are getting the most marketing dollars. Want to take a guess?

---

Trump’s trade policies hurt the heartland

I am ever surprised by the extent to which Trump Administration’s policies directly harm its core supporters. Two recent reports tell the story.

One comes from a group called Tariffs Hurt the Heartland, which has produced an accounting of the losses to businesses in Texas as a result of Republican trade policies—$424 million gone, just in August.
Some of this affects farmers:

Scott Frazier, a south Texas farmer and Secretary-Treasurer of the Texas Farm Bureau, warned that tariffs will have long-term consequences for agriculture by shuttering the foreign markets that farmers in Texas and across the country depend on. One quarter of our agricultural products grown in the U.S. are exported to other countries. The economic well-being of American agriculture depends on maintaining and strengthening our export markets, and farm and ranch families depend on this to survive.

This group also has produced an interactive, searchable map at TariffsHurt.com that let’s you find stories of how tariffs are affecting local communities, state by state, and you can learn more about the campaign here.

The second report comes from the Brookings Institute. It analyzes the effects of Trump’s trade wars on his base.

The report comes with a spreadsheet where you can look up the data for yourself.

Trade wars have consequences, in this case for U.S. agriculture, which according to this report accounts for 15% of the retaliatory tariff burden:

The retaliatory tariffs differ by trading partner, but there are some commonly targeted industries. All four markets focused tariffs on agricultural products. Agriculture cuts a very specific geography across the United States, particularly implicating metro areas in California’s Central Valley as well as rural areas and small towns in states like Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska.

Ouch.
To get a taste (sorry) of the book, here are the first two pages of chapter 4. If you would like to read the Sugar Association’s letter to me and my reply, I’ve included links to them after this excerpt.

How Sweet It Is: Sugar and Candy as Health Foods

If your company produces sugar or products made with it, you have a public relations problem. Sugars are today’s food enemy number 1, toxic by some reports. How much is safe? None, claims science journalist Gary Taubes; sugar is responsible for obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, gout, and Alzheimer’s disease.

Without going nearly that far, the American Heart Association advises six teaspoons as the upper daily limit for women and children. Men are bigger; they get to have nine. Public health recommendations are slightly more generous. The World Health Organization and the US dietary guidelines both advise limiting sugars to 10 percent of daily calories, which works out to about twelve teaspoons a day on average. 1 All these recommendations refer to added sugars. Nobody is or should be concerned about the sugars naturally present in whole fruits and vegetables; the amounts are low, and the sugars are accompanied by vitamins, minerals, and fiber. In contrast, added sugars provide calories devoid of other nutrients.

– 45 –
If you sell sugary products, what to do? Invite the playbook, of course. Cast doubt on science linking sugars to poor health. Resist regulation, fund front groups, manage the media—and be sure to fund your own research. In 2014, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) summarized the sugar industry’s tactics for undermining policy: attack the science, spread misinformation, deploy industry scientists, and influence academics.¹

As we now know from the discovery of decades-old documents from a bankrupt sugar company, this industry was engaged in casting doubt on inconvenient science as early as the 1960s. Then, the Sugar Research Foundation, the forerunner of today’s Sugar Association, was spending 10 percent of its research budget on studies to counter research suggesting an association between sugar and the risk of heart disease. To distract dental professionals from suggesting limits on sugar to prevent tooth decay, the foundation lobbied the National Institute of Dental Research to fund studies on anything except sugar: plaque removal, vaccines, fluoride treatments, mouth bacteria, or tooth brushing. This effort succeeded: the 1971 National Caries Program promoted the alternative methods to reduce tooth decay but said nothing about the need to reduce exposure to sugary foods and drinks.²

Today’s Sugar Association wants to convince you that “sugar” refers only to crystals refined from beets and cane—sucrose, in biochemical terms. Soon after my book Food Politics came out in 2002, I did a radio interview in which I mentioned that soft drinks contain sugar and water but are otherwise nutritionally useless. I soon received a certified letter from a lawyer for the Sugar Association accusing me of making “numerous false, misleading, disparaging, and defamatory statements about sugar.” What had I said? “As commonly known by experts in the field of nutrition, soft drinks have contained virtually no sugar (sucrose) in more than 20 years. The misuse of the word ‘sugar’ to indicate other caloric sweeteners is not only inaccurate, but it is a grave disservice to the thousands of family farmers who grow sugar cane and sugar beets.”³

Want to read the rest of the letter and my reply?

- Letter from the Sugar Association Attorney – Sugar Association 3/27/02
- Response to the Sugar Association – Marion Nestle 4/5/02

Tags: Sugars, Unsavory Truth
Berkeley: Food Politics Lecture Series #2

This is the second of three lectures on Food Politics 2019, this one on “Nutrition Science Under Siege.”

These are sponsored by the Journalism School, Berkeley Food Institute, and 11th Hour Project, and will be at the Logan Multimedia Center, North Gate Hall, 6:00 p.m. Information and registration? Click here.
Obesity threatens public health more than communicable diseases in the present world. Overweight and obesity cause death in more people than those being underweight. Therefore, at the societal level, it is important to support individuals through sustained political commitment. It is clear that the responsibility could be awakened with enhanced knowledge. The awareness derived from information may force people to take responsibility with their life. The public health policies should be established to prevent and avoid overweight and obesity in every age group. With this purpose, the policy makers in public health services should build sustainable strategies for a healthy environment for physical activity and non-processed (raw) food for healthy diet. Public health is a social and political concept aimed at the improving health, prolonging and improving quality of life of the population through promotion, prevention of disease and other forms of interventions (Acheson Report 1988). According to the Department of Health guidance of March 2006, obesity is one of the biggest public health issues facing England. Accurate and appropriate information about people’s health should be provided and what social and behavior factors can affect their health. To summing up, obesity is possibly dominating the public health issue in UK today and its effect can not be seen as an individual but is a society a whole.