

## Scare talk debunked: GMOs, pesticides and antibiotics don't make conventional food unsafe

**A**griculture Secretary Sonny Perdue recently cautioned Americans not to fear their food. That's an amazing thing for any public official to do, let alone the Secretary of Agriculture. Have we really come to the point that people must be told by a cabinet-level government official that their food supply is okay to eat?

**SPOILER ALERT:** Your food is safe. We have one of the safest food systems in the world. But upon reflection, I can see why he made such a comment. Indeed, there seems to be a constant avalanche of reports targeting a threat or cause for worry. And if I don't already fear the food, some people want me to feel guilty for not just what I eat, but almost for even eating at all.

### My So-Called Wrongdoings

Think I'm crazy? Sit down in your local diner and order a meal. Let's go for comfort food: meatloaf, mac and cheese, and a side salad with Thousand Island dressing. Oh, and some apple pie with ice cream for dessert. A glass of ice water with lemon, and maybe a nice cup of really good coffee to cap things off.

So what have I just done here? How does this food get me into a maze of controversies about human, animal and environmental welfare? Let's look at it piece by piece, or bite by bite, if you prefer.

### Let's start with the meatloaf...

It's hamburger, plus some breadcrumbs, some spices and maybe a few chunks of peppers or mushrooms. Maybe I sprinkle some salt and pepper on it, and a touch of ketchup, just for flavor.

- Should I be eating beef at all? It takes lots of water and feed grains to bring an animal to market. It gave off a lot of greenhouse gas while it fattened up, too. It may have been finished off for market confined in a feed lot, and maybe injected with antibiotics at some point. It certainly didn't enjoy the trip to the processing plant. Dietitians tell me too much red meat will clog my arteries, or at least contribute to those extra pounds I seem to carry these days. And if I eat it more than five days a week, I might get Alzheimer's.
- I probably didn't need all that salt, either. It could kick up my blood pressure.
- And what was in those breadcrumbs? Were they from stale old bread they had lying around? Was it made from GMO crops? If so, should I worry?
- What about those peppers and mushrooms? How do I know they were grown responsibly, without taking up too much water, or using too much fertilizer and pesticides? And were the people who picked them paid fairly and treated well?
- Did they add an egg to the meatloaf? My mom used to do that. But if they did, was that egg from a happy, free-range chicken? Was it fed antibiotics? How much cholesterol does the egg add?
- Ketchup...organic tomatoes, or mass-produced in a hothouse or grown hydroponically in an indoor farm somewhere? Picked by whom? And using how much added sugar? What is ascorbic acid, or

citric acid anyway, and why in the world is it in there?

## **Now I'm afraid to even *think* about the mac & cheese...**

- What grain did they use to make the macaroni? Is it also a GMO crop?
- Is the cheese really cheese? What kinds of preservatives, colorings, flavorings and anti-coagulants are squirming around in there, just waiting for me to eat them up?

## **As for the salad...**

- Where in the heck did this Romaine lettuce come from? Should I worry about food poisoning? And what about the tomato, and the cucumber, and that reddish stuff that looks like an onion...is it local? How did it get here? How many hands have actually touched the food I'm about to eat? Who checked to make sure it's clean, fresh and safe?
- As for the dressing, did it come out of a bottle or a 20-gallon vat somewhere?

foodfear

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Image: Inspo Fitness Journal

## **You know, I *used* to love my apple pie...**

Now I'm feeling a little squeamish about it!

- Who is this mysterious Mrs. Smith, and just where is this bucolic Pepperidge Farm, anyway? How do I know it wasn't some team of minimum-wage newbies on an assembly line churning out my mass-produced pie?
- Just where did these apples come from? How much sugar is in there? Or is it high fructose corn syrup? Or maybe some alternative sweetener made from the leaves of a plant the Aztecs once used to smoke to get high? Is the crust an actual food, or maybe some form of bio-degradable, flavor-enhanced cellulose?
- The ice cream isn't really helping, either. Did the cows who supplied the milk have drugs used on them to stimulate more milk production? Were they treated humanely? How was the milk handled?

How much sugar went into the mix in making this? How much artificial flavor?

## **Maybe a sip of water will help calm me down...**

But wait a minute.

- Did this come out of the tap, or from a bottle? What kind of pipes are in the city's water system? Who checks the water for contamination, and for what kind, and when?
- And what about that slice of lemon? Did anybody wash that lemon before they cut it up? How long has it been lying around waiting to be plunked into somebody's water, or iced tea, or finger bowl? Where did it come from, anyway?

Let's just forget about the coffee...and the sugar or artificial sweetener I put in it, or the milk. I no longer care where the coffee beans came from, or who picked them, or much of anything else. I certainly don't care if the milk came from a cow or an almond. I don't even want to think about how much energy was needed to cook all this, or to heat the hot water they will use to wash up.

no eat caution x

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## **Wasteful worries**

Now my appetite is pretty much gone, thanks to all this thinking I've been doing. So what do I do with all this left-over food on the plate?

- If I don't do something with it, they will just scrape it off into the garbage and send it to the local landfill. It will decompose slowly, I suppose. But while it does, it will generate still more greenhouse gas. Food waste in landfills already accounts for 7 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. My contribution here could pollute the water table, if the landfill isn't up to spec. Am I more responsible for global warming if I eat this food, or if I throw it out?
- Maybe the diner will call the local food bank and make sure the left-overs go to good use – you know, for a needy person, or a soup kitchen, or something like that.

Or maybe I just stop eating.

Phew. I just woke up from my nightmare. But this sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? However, this is just a superficial look at some of the issues that surround the food we eat these days. Actually, there are a great many more than these to consider – real, serious issues that people in the food sector wrestle with every day in trying to satisfy the public demand for safe, sustainable food.

## OK, now here's the good news...

Educating worried consumers on our food system is one of the big reasons why we created this blog, so you're in luck. People want to know more about our food system: where their food comes from, how it is produced, how it is delivered, how we keep it safe and make it as wholesome as possible, and more. We all need to know, and, frankly, we should know. And thankfully, farmers have a great story to tell.

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There is no way to adequately describe the commitment, the resilience, the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of the men and women who produce, farm, ranch, and those who manufacture the food products, and those who prepare the food we need and want. We look forward to continued innovation and advancement in our established food system. And what we hear is loud, clear and unequivocal faith in the future of food.

[Secretary Perdue is correct:](#)

This growing fear has the potential to sideline, deter, critical technologies that we already use, and derail technologies in the pipeline, that we already know how to achieve.

Never underestimate our farmers and producers. When commitment, capability and capital converge—look out. All things are possible—including food that people don't fear, and a food system that doesn't induce guilt. If you want to learn more about how our food is grown, food safety, and food waste, take a look at these posts for more information:

Farming and production: [Where do our fruits & veggies come from?](#) | [What is the Farm Bill](#) | [America's salad bowl](#) | [GMOs: a recipe for understanding](#)

Food safety: [There is no such thing as a dirty vegetable](#) | [CDC foodborne illness detection](#) | [Food safety at farmers' markets](#)

Food waste: [Waste not, want not](#) | [Eat beer and drink sandwiches](#)

Government resources: [FDA's Food Safety Modernization Act](#) | [USDA's Food & Nutrition page](#) | [EPA & Pesticides](#) | [FAO's State of Food Security & Nutrition](#) | [WHO & Food Safety](#)

Maybe our food system isn't perfect yet. We need all the intelligence and technologies possible to feed a growing population while regenerating the land. We're doing a better job today than we did yesterday, and we'll do a better job tomorrow than we do today.

Indeed, it's a great big world of possibilities—except maybe for a decent tasting diet cola.

### **The bottom line:**

It takes a concerted effort to address all the questions people raise about where their food comes from and how we make sure our food system conforms to the larger societal goals of fairness, sustainability and transparency. It's an enormous challenge... and we believe our farmers, processors, and food companies are doing an incredible job of meeting all those expectations while continuously improving the safety and sustainability of our food system.

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