

The real reason we're fat

This week, KFC agreed to drop its trans-fat cooking oil, and now the campaign against processed food is beginning to look like a witch hunt, GINA MALLET writes. What we eat isn't the big problem -- it's how much

By GINA MALLET

Saturday, November 4, 2006 – Print Edition, Page F7

Trash that burger, drop that Oreo cookie, throw away those fries, soft drinks, Doritos, chicken nuggets, all salt and sugar . . . These foods are your enemy. They make you fat and ill, and eventually will kill you.

This message is from the "food police" -- the nutritionists, dietitians, health officials and advocacy groups certain the rising obesity rate threatens our future, and only a mass diet change can save us.

About 64 per cent of us are now defined as overweight or officially obese. But the reason is quite simple: We eat too much. Polls show the public considers overeating an individual responsibility. And we all know it. As many as 90 per cent of women diet at one time or another, and they do so to lose weight. They have spurred a hugely profitable diet-food industry, even though everyone knows exactly how to shed a few pounds: Eat fewer than 1,000 calories a day.

But the food police feel it's not our fault we're fat, our food is to blame -- it's unhealthy. But in the process, they may have stepped into a quagmire, because food is complex, more than just sustenance. Science has shown that the only food that does any real good is food you like, food that tastes good.

North Americans love processed food and spend 90 per cent of their food dollars on it. Processed food is also one of their great industrial triumphs, providing 303 million people with not just with the calories they need but huge variety and prices envied by a hungry world.

The food police have long railed at the industry's emphasis on seduction and convenience at the expense of nutrition; at its promotion of the empty calories that define junk food. And now they have struck gold: trans-fatty acid, a tent pole of the industry, has been irrefutably linked to heart disease -- still North America's No. 1 killer.

Discovered more than a century ago, trans fat is a solid, produced when vegetable oil is hydrogenated, that preserves the flavour and lengthens the shelf life when added to

processed foods. A quick scan of labels shows it's now in everything from frozen dinners to margarine.

But the drumbeat against it has grown ever louder -- last spring, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof declared that Girl Guide cookies containing trans fat have killed more Americans than al-Qaeda. He was declared a sexist by one Girl Guide, but the Big Apple is now pondering a trans-fat ban, and last month Disney announced it's removing the fats from everything served at its U.S. attractions.

Now, the first of the fast-food giants has buckled. This week, Kentucky Fried Chicken announced it is taking most trans fat out of its cooking oil. Coincidentally, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) announced it is withdrawing a U.S. lawsuit it filed against the Colonel.

Calmer voices have been overridden. For example, Elizabeth Whelan, head of the American Council on Science and Health, says the health risks of trans fats are greatly exaggerated. Her agency brings together doctors and scientists dedicated to deconstructing overhyped food scares, most notably the claim that farmed salmon containing PCBs may cause cancer. The National Cancer Institute denied the existence of any study that links polychlorinated biphenyls in fish to cancer in humans.

In this case, banning all trans fats would require banning most of what we eat, simply because they're found naturally in meat and dairy, and occur in everyday cooking.

"Any time we heat an oil," says Massimo Marcone, an adjunct professor in food science at the University of Guelph, "a certain amount is formed" -- and the higher the temperature, the greater the output.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration hasn't even set a daily consumption limit. "How much is considered high?" Dr. Marcone asks. "Depends on who you're talking to."

Consumers, meanwhile, realize that we've been here before -- in the 1970s, when the fat frenzy revolved around butter and other animal fats. People were urged to eat low-fat foods and use margarine, as the Ralph Nader-inspired CSPI attacked McDonalds for cooking its fries in tallow, a saturated fat said to raise cholesterol. It recommended vegetable oil with trans fats, just what it's going after today.

Also, the food police have spent years urging us to eat carbs, not fats, and William Willett, chairman of the nutrition department at the Harvard School of Public Health, says in his new book, *Eat, Drink and Be Healthy*, that we have made progress, but obesity and Type 2 diabetes are soaring anyway.

Fat can be satisfying, he explains, so cutting it leaves us hungry, and likely to eat more carbohydrates, which increase weight just as effectively. He says pasta, potatoes, white bread and rice cause spikes in blood-sugar levels, which you don't get with fat, protein or slowly absorbed carbohydrates from vegetables, fruits or whole grains.

So what should we eat? Local organic food has been promoted brilliantly by Alice Waters, who opened her organic restaurant Chez Panisse in 1970 in Berkeley, Calif. Today, the state is the organic capital of North America. Pregnant pigs are pampered, cows treated kindly, hens allowed to run free, and succulent fruit and vegetables flourish in a clean, poison-free environment. Properly managed, it has been claimed, organic methods could make enough food for us all.

"Of course, it would be best to eat fresh food," Dr. Marcone says, "But in the cities we need to get food to the people." Also, Canada imports most of its organic supply, meaning it's not exactly local.

Also, organic -- which currently accounts for less than 3 per cent of the North American market -- requires more land than conventional agriculture, and is no safer, as the recent recall of toxic spinach and carrot juice from California shows. The spinach was found to contain E. coli H7: 157, the same pathogen that poisoned the wells in Walkerton, Ont. , and it may have reached the fields via the excrement of wild pigs that had been drinking from streams poisoned by runoff from a nearby ranch -- a danger bound to increase as the landscape supports more and more livestock.

Being lectured so much is giving consumers indigestion. For example, the food police lauded KFC's trans-fat ban, but Hart Oldenburg of Winnipeg writes: "Get real. KFC, your cohort fatteners, cut calories in half and open new branches under my *thehalfportionplace* Web banner. You can now use whatever fat is the tastiest!"

In 2001, the first study of consumer reactions to healthy food advice, sponsored by the National Cancer Institute, reported that the more negative and confused people feel, the more likely they are to eat fat-laden food and skimp on the fruits and vegetables it's generally agreed we need every day.

Fast-forward to this September, when news services announce that "fast food is getting bigger, meatier with the debut of Burger King's BK Stackers," which include a "Quad Stacker" option: four slabs of beef, four slices of cheese and up to eight slices of bacon smothered in a creamy sauce -- a hefty 1,000 calories and 68 grams of fat.

"This burger might better be called the quadruple-bypass special," says Jeff Novick, director of nutrition for the Pritikin Longevity Center. He thinks consumers are reacting to the constant lecturing about eating healthfully. "It was like people threw up their hands, frustrated. Pretty soon there was some restaurant bragging about serving deep-fried Twinkies."

Emboldened, the A&W chain is running an ad showing a young couple leaving a nouvelle-cuisine eatery, giggling over the tiny portions. As they part, she asks, "How about a burger?" Next thing they're chowing down, and when the waiter asks, "How about dessert?" she replies: "This is dessert."

This adult backlash took time, but children reacted more quickly. The food police have long -- and rightly -- fought against junk-food vending machines and the fry-dominated

diet of school cafeterias. Now, the British government has banned both, prompted by the wrath of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, who last year sensationalized the horrors of junky school meals on his TV program, and pumped millions into providing decent food.

One year later, the Daily Express reveals "How Jamie and school meal fascists turn kids into junk food addicts" because children are rebelling against the new healthy food. The government failed to understand you can't legislate taste.

Guelph's Dr. Marcone is among those who hope that with repeated exposure, good food will catch on in time. But should this be done by locking kids into the lunchroom, as they do at the Rawsome Secondary School in Yorkshire? Two mothers started smuggling fast food through the fence, fearing kids would starve.

And how do you erase the memory of taste? Britons spent 12 years during and after the Second World War on highly nutritious food rationing, but couldn't wait to eat chocolate, butter and beef again.

Dr. Marcone warns that worrying about food can actually affect your body's chemistry, so "it's important to be happy about the food supply."

This is just what Paul Finkelstein is teaching students in his culinary arts program in Stratford, Ont. About 200 of the 1,200 students at Stratford Northwest Secondary School are enrolled in culinary arts, and each morning, about 20 take a double-credit class that includes choosing the day's menu. The students make the bread, pick the organic vegetables in the garden Mr. Finkelstein started in the school yard, and prepare dishes such as roast leg of lamb, slow-roasted pork, homemade pork and beans. An average daily crowd of 200 pays \$3 each for the scoff, about as many as those who cough up more than \$4 for fries and pop at the cafeteria.

But have some sympathy for the food police. Obesity also springs from something they can't control: a society both permissive and litigious. "To alleviate the obesity crisis," Franklin Stone of Common Good, a group out to restore common sense to U.S. law, writes in The New York Times, "we need to focus as much on providing children with increased opportunities for active, stimulating and creative free play as on changing the way they eat.

"Unfortunately, the fear of legal liability has resulted in the loss of significant opportunities for exercise. Playgrounds are boring to anyone over 5 when they are stripped of seesaws, slides, swings and jungle gyms, and hiking trails and sledding hills are being closed. A Massachusetts school has just banned the game of tag."

Time was when 90 minutes of physical education was mandatory. But a Heart and Stroke Foundation study in 2004 found that by Grade 12, only 36 per cent of students in a little more than half of Ontario schools take phys ed.

And in Britain, now Europe's fattest country, journalist Andrew Hagan posits that bad

eating stems from a modern life that has "too much leisure, too little purpose, bad schooling, low motivation."

To stop eating, we must have something inspire us to change. "Work," novelist Alasdair Gray suggests, "as if you're living in the early days of a better nation."

Toronto writer Gina Mallet is the author of Last Chance to Eat: The Fate of Taste in a Fast Food World, winner of the 2005 James Beard Award for Writing on Food.