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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Food Without Fear

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Now that the bloom is finally off the Atkins diet rose, now that the instinct to, say, make a purée of potatoes feels slightly less suicidal, let us take a moment to realize that, when it comes to food, Americans have the tendency to lose all reason. With the same collective head-scratching that goes on when we look back at the big hair and shoulder pads of the 80's, we would do well to ask: What were we thinking?

This question, of course, applies not just to the Atkins diet but to pretty much every diet fad Americans have followed over the last 30 years. In addition to catchy names, these diets tend to have one thing in common: they focus on what we eat - not on where what we eat comes from or how it was grown. Good nutrition has been conveniently, and profitably, reduced to an ingredient list. (Remember the grapefruit diet?)

That's a shame - and there's no better time to explore the ways in which we've been led astray than during Thanksgiving week, a time when Americans are particularly focused on food. (And, coincidentally, a time when we are blessedly between diet fads.) With a little scrutiny, we can see that our reductionist diet logic dissolves like a lump of sugar. Just consider the traditional Thanksgiving spread: it may appear to represent the American pastoral, but looks can be deceiving.

Start with the turkey. If your image of a turkey's life is one of green grass and rolling hills, look more closely. Nearly 300 million turkeys are raised today on factory farms where they live in windowless buildings illuminated by bright lights 24 hours a day. (This keeps the turkeys awake and eating.) The birds stand wing to wing on wood shavings and eat an overly fortified diet that enables them to reach an ideal dressed weight of 15 pounds in 12 to 14 weeks. The most popular breed is the Broad Breasted White, aptly named because these turkeys develop disproportionately large breasts, which makes it difficult for the birds to walk (if they had room to do so) and procreate (assuming they'd want to) without artificial insemination.

So what kind of bird would fit more accurately with our agrarian fantasies? Well, how about one that spends most of its life outdoors? Such birds - called pastured birds - are able to move around freely. Instead of having to be injected with antibiotics to stay healthy, they doctor themselves, seeking out certain plants at certain times of the year for pharmacological reasons. Because they expend so much energy moving around, they also grow more slowly: it takes them a month longer to reach slaughter weight than factory birds, which is one of the reasons pasturing is less attractive to industrial farmers. Scientific research comparing the health benefits of conventionally raised turkey to pastured turkey is scarce, but some work has been done on chickens. A study sponsored by the Department of Agriculture in 1999, for example, found that pastured chickens have 21 percent less fat, 30 percent less saturated fat, 50 percent more vitamin A and 400 percent more omega-3 fatty acids than factory-raised birds. They also have 34 percent less cholesterol.

The pasture principle isn't limited to fowl. Compared to most American beef, which is raised on a grain-intensive diet, pasture-fed beef offers 400 percent more vitamin A and E. It is also much richer in beta-carotene and conjugated linoleic acids, all of which inhibit cancer. It's also higher in omega-3 fatty acids, which are a major inhibitor of heart disease. These benefits don't exist at these levels in animal that are fed an unvaried and unnatural diet.

The pasture principle can be applied to vegetables as well. We don't live off the food we eat - we live off the energy in the food we eat. So while Mom asked us, "Did you eat your fruits and vegetables?" today we might well ask: "What are our vegetables eating?"

It seems axiomatic but it's worth remembering that in order to experience the health benefits of the roasted broccoli at the Thanksgiving table, that broccoli needs to have been healthy too. We can be forgiven for ignoring the obvious because most every diet I've seen treats a head of broccoli the way Gertrude Stein talked about a rose - but a broccoli is not a broccoli is not a broccoli, especially if you consider how and from where its grown.

Sadly, the broccoli and the other brassicas on your holiday table (brussels sprouts, cabbage, turnips, kale, mustard greens) were most likely grown in a monoculture - a place where, with the help of large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, nothing but the crop is allowed to grow. Fertilizers are as pervasive in these large farms as tractors, especially synthetic nitrogen. And you can understand why: the chemicals bulk up vegetables beautifully and quickly, enabling them to withstand the rigors of long-distance travel so that they can arrive at your supermarket unbruised and brightly colored. But it's a little like dating someone on steroids: the look and feel may be an initially appealing, but in the end it's all kind of disconcerting.

And think what gets lost. A serving of broccoli is naturally rich in vitamins A and B, and has more vitamin C than citrus fruit. But raised in an industrial farm monoculture, shipped over a long distance and stored before and after being delivered to your supermarket, it loses up to 80 percent of its vitamin C and 95 percent of its calcium, iron and potassium. Fruits and vegetables grown organically, however, have higher levels of antioxidants. That's largely because a plant's natural defense system produces phenolic compounds, chemicals that act as a plant's defense against pests and bugs. These compounds are beneficial to our health, too. When plants are grown with herbicides and pesticides, they slow down their production of these compounds. (Even more important, from a cook's point of view, organically grown fruits and vegetables taste better - their flavors practically burst from the ground and demand to be expressed, and we chefs merely comply.)

The same rules apply to the root vegetables, whether potatoes, sunchokes, beets, parsnips or carrots. Seek out ones grown in nutrient-rich soil for the greatest flavor and benefit. You can't buy good quality soil in a bag any more than you can buy good nutrition in a pill. Most organic farmers encourage complex relationships between crop roots, soil microbes and minerals - relationships that become wholly disrupted by chemical additives.

What about the milk and eggs that go into Thanksgiving pies and tarts? The industrialization of our food supply did not spare the dairy industry. Not surprisingly, pastured dairy cattle and laying hens produce more nutritious milk and cheese - pastured eggs in particular, with their glowing yellow yolks, have up to three times the amount of cancer-fighting omega-3's of eggs that come from factory hens.

As a chef, I am often mystified as I hear diners, rooting around for a nutrition and dietary cure, ask for this steamed and that on the side, and in the process deny themselves pleasure. Choosing what dietary advice of the moment to follow by putting a wet finger up to the wind, our patrons decide, or succumb, en masse, to a pummeling of such wearisome regularity that it begins to resemble the "rosebud" of "Citizen Kane": the clue that solves everything but means nothing.

There is an ecology of eating. Like any good ecosystem, our diet should be diverse, dynamic and interrelated. In 1984 Americans were spending roughly 8 percent of their disposable income on health care and about 15 percent on food. Today, those numbers are essentially reversed. An ever-more reductionist diet - protein this year, carbohydrates next year - ignores plant and animal systems loaded with genetic complexity, and the benefits that complexity passes down to us.

So as you're getting ready for Thanksgiving, think of yourself less as a consumer of the harvest bounty and more, in the words of Carlo Petrini of the Slow Foods movement, as a co-producer. Try to remember what you know intuitively: that we can't be healthy unless our farms are healthy; that the end of the food chain is connected to the beginning of the food chain; that we can't lose touch with the culture in agriculture (it dates back to before Dr. Atkins). To the extent possible, shop at farmers markets for your Thanksgiving foods. Try to choose diversity over the abundance that the big food chains offer. Your food will be tastier, fresher and more nutritious. You'll be able to have your cake (and your bacon and your bread and your potatoes) and eat it too.

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