

# INFORMED EATING

*A Newsletter of Food Politics and Analysis*



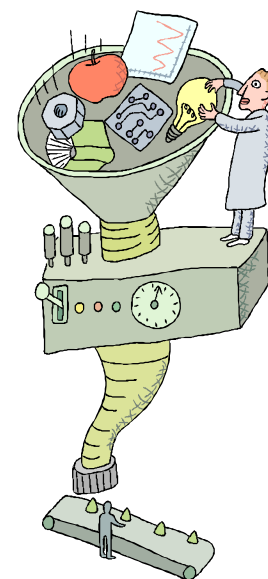
## In This Issue

While combing through the mountain of food industry news published over the last few months, we were struck by two persistent and troubling trends: the increasing “industrialization” of the growing market for organic foods, along with Big Food’s stepped-up efforts to introduce industrial foods, and industrial food culture, into unconquered territories abroad.

Rather than present these related issues in the “news digest” format we used in our previous premiere issue, we’ve selected a less constrictive layout for this edition, which we think will be more conducive to in-depth analysis. Judging from the feedback we’ve received, that’s the kind of coverage our readers are hungry for — and the kind we’re anxious to provide. But rest assured, we will continue to supplement our analysis with hopeful news about those who are working to create a better food system. And since dancing, as Emma Goldman suggested long ago, is an indispensable component of any revolution, we’ll be sure to include some healthy doses of levity, too.

Our thanks to all those who offered constructive opinions and advice on our first issue. *Informed Eating* is still in its infancy, but we aim to build a wider audience of activists, leaders, policymakers, and other concerned readers. We welcome your further comments and suggestions, and we hope you enjoy our November/December issue.

—The Editors



## Organic Goes Industrial

On October 21, a new law codifying federal standards for organic food and agriculture came into effect in the U.S. The National Organic Rule (NOR) is the product of a long, hard-fought battle between organic advocates and the Department of Agriculture, which, under pressure from the biotech and chemical industries, had initially attempted to include under the organic rubric such decidedly *non-organic* practices as genetic engineering and the use of fertilizer made from municipal waste.

Fortunately, activists’ efforts to strike down those earlier proposals were successful. The department’s final guidelines prevent genetically modified raw material, irradiation, synthetic chemicals, hormones, and antibiotics from being used in foods classified as “100 percent organic,” but do permit deviations from this standard in the case of products labeled as “certified organic” or “made with organic ingredients.” (See the USDA’s National Organic Program Web page for more information on

these distinctions.)

Many food industry analysts are hailing NOR as a welcome and long overdue reform that promises to lend some coherence to what has so far been an inconsistent set of rules governing the composition of organic foods and the methods used to produce them. Some leaders in the organic movement, however, are not so sanguine. They worry that the new law is not stringent enough, and that it may be a

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## Obesity Watch

### U.S. Favors Industry-Friendly Solutions

On October 15, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson and Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman met with officials from the National Restaurant Association and the National Council of Chain Restaurants to, according to a government press release, “begin dialog about how the food and beverage industries can help Americans combat obesity, which has reached epidemic proportions.”

The discussions are an extension on the Bush administration’s “HealthierUS Initiative,” which takes a “more physical activity/balanced diet” approach to the problem of America’s ever-expanding waistline.

“I am calling on leaders from the food and beverage industry to aid us in our fight against obesity,” Secretary Thompson said.

“Bringing various industries together to promote balanced diets and healthier lifestyles is important as we look at more aggressive ways to fight obesity in America,” Secretary Veneman added.

Curiously, Veneman’s agency is proposing to “aggressively” tackle the obesity crisis with the help of an industry whose bald-faced hostility toward the idea of reduced calorie intake was famously summed up by Wray Finney at a 1977 Con-

gressional hearing: “*Decrease* is a bad word, Senator,” opined the then-president of the National Cattlemen’s Association.

On the strength of that conviction, the food industry spends a tidy \$10 billion a each year on advertising, and lobbies tirelessly for government policies designed to convince Americans to eat more and more of its largely unhealthy and fattening products. (For more on this

point, see Marion Nestle’s recent book, *Food Politics*.)

In her relatively short tenure at USDA, Veneman has done little to discourage the food industry from promot-

ing its “eat-more” agenda. She was instrumental, for example, in launching a new round of trade negotiations for the World Trade Organization aimed at eliminating trade barriers and expanding export opportunities for American agribusiness. And in September, her department announced plans to prop up the sagging hog market by purchasing \$30 million worth of pork for the federal school lunch program.

In short, Veneman’s USDA has proven itself to be a staunch ally of U.S. corporations with a vested interest in getting Americans to consume as much food as possible.

This track record of unabashed support for industry’s growth-at-all-costs objectives raises serious doubts about

Veneman’s professed commitment to promoting a healthier, less calorically dense American diet. If her agency were genuinely interested in lowering the nation’s calorie intake, it could surely have enlisted the help of a less biased, and less politically powerful, “partner.”

### Australian Proposals Show Some “Teeth”

In contrast to the Bush administration’s industry- and personal choice-based solutions, Australia’s federal health ministry is contemplating several anti-obesity initiatives aimed at actually *restricting* the ability of big food conglomerates to disseminate their salt-, sugar-, and calorie-rich foods. For example, as noted in an October 13 story in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the department is considering limits on television advertisements for fast food and candy, especially those directed at children.

The government will solicit the input of major fast food chains while developing its anti-obesity policies. As a result, they may well amount to little more than well-intentioned lip service by the time the final rules are written. Nevertheless, Australian lawmakers’ somewhat more courageous ideas about how to reduce consumption of industry’s fat-promoting products should be of interest to policymakers, nutrition advocates, and others concerned with stemming the rising tide of obesity in the U.S. ■



## Informed Eating

A Newsletter of Food  
Politics and Analysis

*Informed Eating* is published bimonthly by the Center for Informed Choices (CIFIC).

CIFIC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 2000. We advocate for a diet based on whole, unprocessed, local, organically grown plant foods, and educate the public about the politics of food. Through lectures, workshops, and special events, CIFIC brings people together to share ideas and resources to help create a more just, humane, and sustainable food system. Please contact us for more information.

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boon to large food producers bent on “industrializing” organics and co-opting its ideals.

### The new face of organic

According to an October 13 article in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, such fears may be well founded. It noted that the new standards will likely unleash “an avalanche” of new organic products bearing the USDA’s official seal of approval. The *Good Housekeeping*-like label will also be affixed to a large and growing list of organic goods already on the market — everything from H.J. Heinz Company’s organic ketchup to organic Cheetos, Tostitos, and Sun Chips, produced by PepsiCo’s Frito-Lay unit.

In the September/October issue of *Organic Gardening*, Joan Dye Gusow, a national nutrition activist, author, and farmer summed up the organic movement’s trepidation about a future in which neon-orange snack foods become the new face of organic: “This isn’t what we meant. When we said organic, we meant local. We meant healthful. We meant being true to the ecologies of regions.

We meant mutually respectful growers and eaters. We meant social justice and equality.” Industry has apparently adopted a somewhat more “pragmatic” interpretation of organics, which, conveniently enough, enables it to channel consumer demand for more healthful and ecologically sustainable foods in a direction that poses no threat to the industrial foundations upon which modern food empires have been built.

This is hardly surprising. From a business standpoint, the industrialization of organics — the fastest growing sector of an otherwise stagnant food economy — is an eminently foreseeable development. As a September 30 cover story in *Newsweek* noted, “Over the past decade the market for organic food has grown by 15 to 20 percent every year — five times faster than food sales in general. Nearly 40 percent of U.S. consumers now reach occasionally for something labeled organic, and sales are expected to top \$11 billion this year.”

Clearly, food makers are not about to cede such enormous profit and growth potential to small farmers producing whole, healthful, locally grown foods.

## McTeachers Salt Fries for McFunding

“It’s demeaning.” That’s how one teacher at Martin Elementary School in South San Francisco described her school’s participation in McDonald’s “McTeacher’s Night,” according to an October 15 story in *The San Francisco Chronicle*. McTeacher’s Night, the piece explained, is a program set up by the fast food giant to raise funds for cash-strapped schools. Teachers volunteer to work three hours behind the counter at a local McDonald’s outlet, and the company donates 20 percent of the evening’s profits to their school.



The idea of educators shilling for corporate cash does not sit well with some teachers at Martin Elementary, however. They’re concerned that the program is sending mixed messages to schoolchildren. *The Chronicle* quoted first-grade teacher Rebecca Coolidge, who objected that McTeachers Night is effectively “endorsing a product that contributes to the epidemic of childhood obesity and heart disease, even though the state dictates that we teach students to avoid junk food.”

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Instead, they've created "organic," "natural," and "healthy" versions of familiar processed foods that, nutritionally and environmentally speaking, are only marginally less objectionable than the products they're intended to replace.

Granted, adding organic Twizzlers to the Safeway snack aisle may result in a little more acreage being put into organic production, but those modest ecological benefits would be offset by the tremendous amount of fossil fuel, packaging, and other resources expended in the production and distribution of these "value-added" products.

***"This isn't what we meant. When we said organic, we meant local. We meant healthful. We meant being true to the ecologies of regions. We meant mutually respectful growers and eaters. We meant social justice and equality."***

**—Joan Dye Gussow**

Also, the "greening" of the junk food market will probably do little to improve the nutritional well-being of consumers — an objective that's especially pressing in light of recent studies showing that one-third of all American adults are now clinically obese and at risk of developing diet-related health problems such as heart disease and diabetes. (For more on these findings, see the October 8 story

by Reuters Health; for more on the obesity crisis, see page 2.) For manufacturers at least, the real virtue of industrial organics is their fantastically high profit margins, which would seem to account for the willingness of corporations to pump loads of capital into their research and development.

### Stealth ownership

Along with creating new products, industrial food giants bent on redefining and dominating the organic market have been busy snapping up smaller organic and natural brand names — and the customers loyal to them. An October 9 *Business Week* article spotlighted several corporations that have found "stealth" ownership of a down-home cottage name a helpful marketing tool.

These include General Mills, the fifth-largest food company in the world, which now owns Cascadian Farm, a once-tiny upstart launched 30 years ago by a group of Seattle-area free-thinkers. "With its folksy name and bucolic, mountain-and-valley logo," said *Business Week*, "Cascadian Farm organic entrees evoke a sense of purity and homegrown goodness that [General Mills'] Hamburger Helper, Green Giant, and Old El Paso just can't muster." Also on the list is PepsiCo's Quaker Oats division, which, unbeknownst to most consumers, is the maker of Mother's, a seemingly small and maternal line of "natural," ready-to-eat cereals.

### Brave new produce



Industry's efforts to move organics in a direction more suited to its profit-oriented objectives are by no means confined to the processed food

sector. Major produce distributors like Dole and Earthbound Farms are also getting in on the act. As the largest grower and shipper of organic produce in North America, Earthbound supplies supermarket chains like Whole Foods and Safeway with a variety of organic fruits and vegetables. Many of these products have value-added features designed to attract convenience-minded shoppers — for example, precut carrots packaged with single-serve containers of ranch dip dressing.

Supporters of big organics point to its potential to reduce the amount of land farmed with agricultural chemicals while making organic produce more affordable and accessible to those with lower incomes. While not discounting these possible benefits, critics contend that the large-scale organic model entails social and environmental costs that industry is less eager to publicize. In an October 14 op-ed in *The New York Times*, Samuel Fromartz argues that giant organic operations like Earthbound pose a serious threat to the livelihoods of small organic growers, who lack the resources and capital needed to compete with big firms with designs on their customers and farms. Fromartz adds

that the new organic certification law, with its byzantine rules and extensive paperwork requirements, will likely put them at even more of a competitive disadvantage.

Big organic farms can also be criticized on an environmental level: They are highly resource-intensive operations set up to produce a limited variety of crops and distribute them over great distances — an approach far removed from the original organic movement's concern with diversity and localness.

Interestingly, Big Food's campaign to push the boundaries of what is meant by organic agriculture is being waged from quarters even more unlikely than the Dole banana plantations. For example, Syngenta, a major agrochemical and biotechnology firm, is "hoping to tap the keen demand for organic or environmentally friendly produce," according to a September 24 item on the industry Web site Just-food.com. "This might seem an unusual move for one of the

world's leading producers of pesticides," the piece added, "but Syngenta expects it to help boost profits."

Toward this end, it has collaborated with three other companies on a marketing venture known as the NewProduce Network. The Network's first achievements include a "personal-size" seedless watermelon, along with a line of "pro-environment" vegetables designed to be cultivated with minimal pesticide inputs. As noted in the September 17 issue of *Forbes Magazine*, the new varieties of produce have so far been bred by conventional methods. However, John Sorenson, head of Syngenta's vegetable seeds division for North America, does not rule out the possibility of creating "earth-friendly" NewProduce with the help of more high-tech means: "If genetic modification produces tastes or other values that we think are worth incorporating, we won't hesitate to use it."

### "America is changing."

The race to cash in on the nation's burgeoning appetite for natural and organic fare is even being joined by fast food titans like Burger King, Wendy's, and McDonald's, which have recently added more "healthful" options to their menus. Mike Roberts, president of McDonald's USA, was quoted in the September 30 edition of *USA Today* as saying that "America is changing, and McDonald's is going to change right with it. If you'd told me three years ago

that McDonald's was going to have a yogurt-and-fruit parfait at all of its restaurants across the country, I'd have told you that you were crazy."

Sadly, Robert's belief that the sugary desserts of a fast food behemoth are harbingers of a brave, new, healthier tomorrow will no doubt resonate with citizens whose ideas about food have been shaped by a social and political climate dominated by the technological discourse and prescriptions of industry.



It's incumbent upon those who know better to expose industrial "health" foods for what they really are: the products of profit-driven corporate elites with a vested interest in greenwashing (or perhaps we should say, "nutri-washing") their image, not in fundamentally restructuring the massive agri-industrial complex. That's a task for social movements, organizations, and concerned citizens — not corporations. And it must be undertaken if we are to put an end to Big Food's efforts to eviscerate all that is organic, natural, and healthy. ■



"McTeachers," continued from page 3

In the past two years, the Golden Arches has expanded McTeachers Night, which now reaches 2,500 schools in 14 western states. Last year the program doled out a total of \$500,000, with individual schools earning about \$800 each. That might be enough to pay for some pencils and erasers, but it probably won't cover the hefty diet-related medical bills that the loyal customers created by the McTeachers Night campaign are likely to face. ■

## Food: The Final Frontier?

The food industry's forays into the once countercultural-fringe area of organics suggest that corporations are not squeamish about penetrating new, unconquered markets; indeed, without such resolve, they'd risk perishing at the hands of their more ruthless competitors. In our previous issue, we reported on Kentucky Fried Chicken's efforts to shore up its bottom line by introducing China's rapidly growing population of car owners to the wonders of American-style drive-through dining. Recent press reports indicate that Big Food's hunger to accumulate profits and markets along an expanding frontier is as robust as ever.

### Eye on India

A September 10 item on Just-food.com noted, for example, that multinational food conglomerates like Nestlé are now targeting India, a country of more than one billion people, with hopes of capturing a greater share of its butter market, which has spiked considerably over the last few years. Also in India, CSIRO, an Australia-based industrial research group, announced in a September 17 media release that it is working with the Indian National Dairy Development Board on a project aimed at boosting the nation's milk production capacity.

Dr. Suresh Gulati, a CSIRO researcher, proclaimed that this development "could have impor-

tant economic and social implications for India's 11 million village dairy farmers." Gulati was apparently referring to the high-yield "benefits" to be gained from equipping India's small farmers with the tools of Western agribusiness, which, of course, are remarkably adept at coaxing every last possible drop of liquid out of bovine udders. Missing from Gulati's cheery appraisal of his group's campaign to industrialize the Indian dairy business, however, is any mention of the profound environmental, animal welfare, and public health risks it poses. The latter are especially noteworthy considering that increased dairy intake does not auger well for the digestive health of India and much of the global East and South, a population with a high incidence of lactose intolerance. More dairy consumption in this region also promises to contribute to escalating rates of obesity, heart disease, and other diet-related disorders, which were once largely confined to native eaters of the rich Western diet.

### Friends in high places

Of course, for multinational corporations, such effects are little more than the routine, "externalized" social costs of doing business; they generally

do not distract them from their efforts to ingrain industrial foods, and industrial food culture, in fresh territory.

In fact, when it comes to that goal, Big Food can count on generous political assistance from domestic governments as well as from the global financial institutions that administer transnational capital. In our previous issue, we reported, for example, on a Bush administration-backed initiative aimed at easing trade barriers that have been hampering the ability of U.S.-

based agribusiness to introduce its products into foreign markets.

In a special November/December edition of *Adbusters* magazine focusing on the industrial food economy, Anuradha Mittal of the Institute for Food and Development Policy observes that the U.S. is also using "its powerful influence on the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and international trade agreements [to pressure] poor countries to remove subsidies that favor local producers, and to lower tariff charges on foreign imports. At the same time, America shields itself from foreign competition by increasing its own subsidies and maintaining its tariffs." The result is an ever-larger farm surplus at home and artificially depressed markets overseas, into which American agribusiness can easily unload its excess products while undermining local economies.



**Nutritional imperialism**

It is probably not an overstatement to refer to the food industry’s efforts to extend its tentacles into every last corner of the global food basket as a kind of “nutritional imperialism.” In the name of greater corporate efficiency and profitability, market-hungry transnational corporations are rapidly eroding the diversity, wholeness, and healthfulness of indigenous foods, along with the ecological integrity of local food systems.

Local diets and the ways of life associated with them are being commodified, homogenized, and brought under the orbit of an increasingly seamless global food order. Today a visit to a McDonald’s and a major supermarket in Bangkok is not much different from a similar excursion in Paris or Tokyo.

While corporate propaganda may trumpet the supposed abundance and variety produced by the industrial food system, such claims ring hollow in a world where over 830 million people go hungry

*Local diets and the ways of life associated with them are being commodified, homogenized, and brought under the orbit of an increasingly seamless global food order.*

every day while the remainder rely on only a dozen or so major food crops for nourishment (either directly or in the form of animals that have consumed them first). Once again, it’s up to activists, organizations, and others troubled by this development to pierce through the ideological veil and illuminate the unfulfilled promises of the agri-industrial complex, so that its grip on our food supply and ways of life can be broken and a liberated, ecologically sane, and healthful society created. ■



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## Fighting Back

In light of the rather discouraging news about agribusiness's recent inroads into the India dairy market (see page 6), it's heartening to learn that Western efforts to export the industrial model of agriculture to India are encountering healthy opposition. According to an October 8 story from the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), every year thousands of Indian farmers are shunning modern agricultural practices in favor of more sustainable organic methods.

"The shift is perceptible," said IANS. It noted that in the Maharashtra region alone over 200,000 farmers have turned to organic farming, and that 5,000 acres are now under organic production in the state of Haryana.

Many farmers in India were influenced by Japanese organic guru Masanobu Fukuoka, who helped spark an organic movement that has been growing steadily since 1996.

The noted author and organic advocate Vandana Shiva has also been working to move Indian

agriculture in a more sustainable direction. Shiva founded the non-governmental organizations Navdanya and ARISE in hopes of promoting organic farming and building a national movement to protect the diversity and integrity of living resources, especially native seeds. Her groups have established 50 research and development projects throughout the country, which have helped train over 10,000 Indian farmers in organic techniques.

Shiva is hopeful that India's burgeoning organic movement will have a positive social and ecological impact on the nation. Organic farming means "not spoiling water, destroying soil fertility or wiping out biodiversity," she said. "It [means] saving farmers' livelihoods while ensuring healthy food." And if Shiva has any say in the matter, we can be certain that India's burgeoning organic movement will not be taking its cues from the large-scale, industrialized version of organics that seems to be gaining ground in the West. ■



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