Health & Medicine

The Politics Of Eating Well

By
Rebecca Shapiro
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Former *New York Times* columnist and best-selling cookbook author Mark Bittman is a lecturer in health policy and management at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. A leader in the progressive food movement, Bittman examines the intersection between food, public health, and social justice. We asked him to explain why he thinks our food system is flawed and how he recommends fixing it.

For most of your career, you were primarily a cookbook author. When did you become interested in food as a public-health issue?

It was gradual. In the 1990s, I saw that there were big problems with the ways we produced and consumed food, and that those problems were getting worse. I saw the decline of small farming, the beginning of the obesity epidemic, and the surge in cases of diabetes that followed. I saw the increased reliance on hyper-processed food. And more. So I started gradually incorporating environmental and social issues into my food writing. As a first step, I started working on a comprehensive vegetarian cookbook, *How to Cook Everything Vegetarian*, and I began to encourage people to incorporate more plants into their diets.

Then a couple of critically important books came out — *Fast Food Nation*, by Eric Schlosser, and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan '81GSAS — and I realized — rather late, upon reflection — that I, too, could be tackling these issues more aggressively. I had been writing for the *New York Times* for over a decade at that point, so I began with periodic pieces in the Sunday Review. Eventually I went to the Opinion section and became the first food opinion writer for a major paper.

You joined the Mailman School in 2016. What drew you to academia?

I felt I had accomplished all that I could as a columnist. I wanted to work collaboratively on these issues with like-minded people who shared my concerns. For the most part, it's been an inspiring and productive environment.

Your first major initiative at Columbia was hosting a free weekly lecture series. Why did you choose that public format?

Just before I started teaching at Columbia, I lived in Berkeley for a year. In California there's a near constant public conversation about how to remake the food-production system. I wanted to continue that conversation on the East Coast, while shifting the focus away from agriculture. There's more agriculture on the West Coast, and so there's more opportunity for agricultural change there, but there was definitely still room for a broader conversation here.

We have a public-health crisis related to food production, and while much of that has to do with agriculture, it also has to do with labor and immigration and race and environmental policy. I wanted to focus on the ways these issues are interconnected.

Let’s start with labor.

Well, the plight of most food workers today resembles that of industrial workers a hundred years ago. Eight of the ten worst paying jobs in America are in food production or are related to food. That means that the people who are bringing us food, who arguably have the most important jobs in the United States, often can’t afford to feed themselves.

How can we address that problem?

The fast answer is with organization and, well, rabble-rousing. But on a basic level it starts with empathy. Most people in the United States could afford to pay more for food as a percentage of their income, and a small increase in food costs could make a big difference in the lives of food workers. The best example of a program putting this principle into practice comes from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an advocacy group in Florida that launched the penny-a-pound tomato campaign. They used protests and boycotts to basically shame fast-food companies and retailers — including Walmart — into paying a penny per pound more for tomatoes at the wholesale level. The cost passed on to consumers was minuscule, but it translated into higher wages for pickers.

Many low-wage food workers are immigrants. How have recent changes to immigration policy affected food production?

The more President Trump limits immigration, the harder it is for American agriculture to function; we don’t yet have enough data to know for sure, but it can’t help but have an impact. These are jobs that are almost universally taken by immigrants, both legal and undocumented. And it’s not just the policies but also the rhetoric, which has been racist and anti-poor and generally discouraging to immigrant workers.

What other proposed policies could impact the food landscape?

Trump made a number of promises on the campaign trail that could drastically affect how we produce and consume food. Luckily, he hasn’t gotten around to many of them yet, but most of us are concerned about environmental deregulation, school food, health care, and of course continued unqualified support for industrial agriculture with continued ignorance of the better alternatives. One very concrete threat is to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — commonly

called food stamps — which will come up for a vote in 2018 as a part of the farm bill. SNAP is an entitlement program. If we make qualifying for it more difficult, and knowledge about it harder to come by, it will fundamentally limit access to food for millions of Americans.

Can you talk a little about how environmental regulations affect food production?

Food production and the environment are inextricably linked. Our current agriculture system is responsible for more greenhouse-gas emissions than any other sector of our economy, aside from energy. Sixty percent of government-subsidized agriculture is going to fund crops like corn and soy, which are mostly used to feed animals or fuel cars. The fewer regulations we have, of course, the easier it is for industrial agriculture companies to continue these damaging practices. It also makes it easier for them to make money and encourages their dominance in American food production.

In your first *New York Times* column, you issued a food manifesto, outlining your priorities for the future. One of the focal points was promoting small farmers.

Right. Small farmers are crucial for the environment and for our health. We need the kinds of farmers that are growing nourishing food for people, instead of commodity crops that are intended for animals or cars or processed junk that makes us sick.

So, first of all, we need to get land into the right hands. Are there people who want to farm and grow good food? I think there are, but many can’t afford land. There are credible solutions — land trusts for preserving farmland, farm business incubators, and federal and state programs — but the barriers remain high. There’s also been a shift in the farming population — a recent survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition found that a majority of new farmers don’t come from farming families, and have college educations. But onerous student-loan obligations often prohibit people from going into or staying in agriculture. We need legislation that adds farmers to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

Finally, small farmers need better access to markets. The majority of our produce is purchased in huge quantities and plugged into a system geared to them. Someone that has three acres might have trouble breaking into that system and finding a market for their products. So they need to be near cities that have policies for

buying from small farmers — that can figure out how to aggregate enough broccoli from local farms, for example, that it equals a shipment from California.

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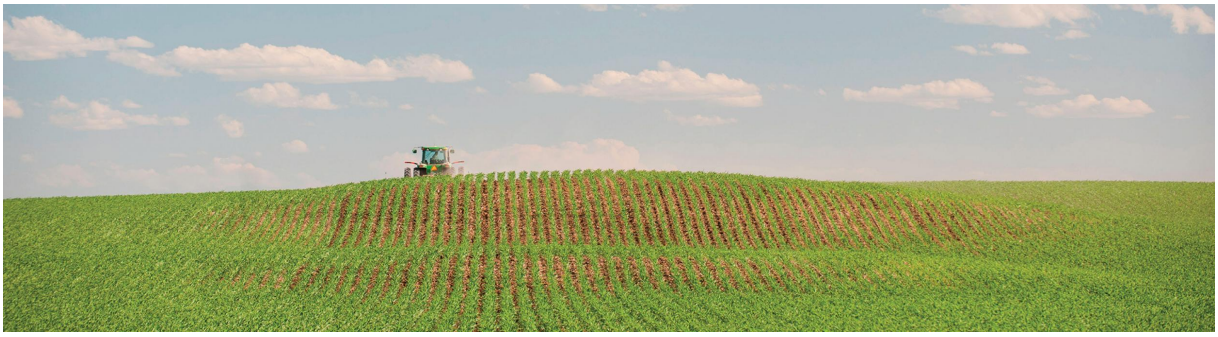

“It’s a happy coincidence that eating what’s better for your body is also better for our collective body.”

What other countries should we look to as models for food policy?

I’m spending the next six months traveling in the hopes of figuring out exactly that. It’s a tough question, because governments are constantly changing, and that can curtail progress. Brazil has really been a front-runner in terms of progressive food policy — it adopted a national food policy in 2003, which proved to dramatically reduce poverty and child mortality. Some of the policies there, like mandating that a percentage of school lunches be sourced from local farmers, are things I’d like to see here. But the government changed hands in 2016, and a number of the policies stalled or were reversed.

You’ve written extensively on obesity and how the American diet has declined. How do you think the government should legislate these kinds of issues?

The obesity epidemic is dire and is single-handedly reversing a hundred years of progress in public health. For the first time in generations, today’s children have

shorter life expectancies than their parents, largely because a third of them are likely to develop type 2 diabetes.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was a step in the direction of an integrated national health-care system, which I think is our only hope for combating problems like obesity and diabetes. But we need national dietary standards that are easy for people to understand and follow. Our current dietary standards are hundreds of pages long, and they focus on minutiae — how much of individual nutrients people should be getting. Instead, we need to prioritize some big-picture messages: a plant-based diet, reduced calorie consumption in general, less sugar, and real, unprocessed foods.

What about things like food labeling?

Under the Obama administration, we made a little progress on getting national label enhancements. As a part of the ACA, every chain restaurant nationwide is now required to post nutrition content and calorie counts. We've had a similar policy in New York for several years, and while there's no hard science yet on whether it has had an impact on people's choices, I continue to think that it's a step in the right direction.

What do you think is the most important thing people can do to improve their diets?

They can cook more. Home cooking was the foundation of most of my career, and it's something about which I remain passionate. It's an important way forward. The way you control what you put in your mouth and in your body is by cooking. You try to buy real food, and you prepare it yourself, and lo and behold, it's healthy. It takes practice, but it's fun.

There are, of course, things we can do policy-wise to make it easier for everyone to have access to good, real food. But we also need to encourage the kind of culture that values cooking and making good food decisions. Even if you live in what people call a food desert, with a limited budget and no access to a fancy farmers' market, you can make better choices. Rice and canned beans, with onions and peppers or carrots, is cheaper and much more nutritious for a family than getting McDonald's. We just need to make that the norm. If you spend a lot of time around public-health people, you start to hear the mantra, "We have to make the healthy choice the easy choice."

You’re known as a fierce advocate for a plant-based diet, though you’re not a vegetarian yourself.

The personal decisions we make are important, and this is an area where we can encourage people to make reasonable changes. Our current diet is killing us individually, and it’s environmentally unsustainable. It’s a happy coincidence that eating what’s better for your body is also better for our collective body. I wanted to help people see that there’s a very manageable way to do that. For many years I’ve adopted what I call the “vegan before six” diet — I avoid meat and dairy products during the day (before 6 p.m.) and relax about it at night. But that’s only one way to address the issues, and it might not be the most practical one for a lot of people.

What else can people do to be responsible food consumers?

Well, what I’ve tried to do with my lecture series and my columns is to help people understand how all these issues are connected. This is about every aspect of democracy, and I believe that we need to be a more engaged citizenry. I don’t care whether you organize around labor or the environment or race. Almost every issue affects food, and vice versa. It’s all the same struggle.

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