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Less is less, which is not more

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Since January 19, 2013, I've lost 42 pounds. I simply decided that rolling along at 250 was too much. So I changed how I ate.

I reduced volume by about half. Portion-control has worked for me. I also cut out most bad carbs. I've stuck with more or less daily exercise that burns about 500 to 600 calories.

I've been able to maintain resistance to high-calorie foods I like -- pizza, bagels, cherry pie, bread, pasta, cookies and ice cream -- by thinking of them as enemies.

My first line of defense is not bringing them into the house; my second is to thumb my nose when they call by identifying their come-hithers as an enemy trap and then getting some other taste in my mouth/brain; and my third has been to replace the bad guys with likable, lower-calorie substitutes, such as melons, blueberries, beef jerky and sugar-free ice pops.

Through no virtue of my own, I've never had a sweet tooth for soda or candy. I don't crave either the processed fat-salt-sugar junk foods or the fast-food belly-busters. I get few calories from liquids, including alcohols.

I occasionally eat badly, but it's rarely mindless gorging. In restaurants, I avoid appetizers, sample the bread, order a salad with protein or a fish entrée and, maybe, split a dessert.

As important as anything else, I'm stepping on our scale every day at the same time and then noting the verdict in my appointment book.

At my annual physical a few weeks ago, my long-time doc pointed me toward 185 pounds -- 23 to go -- with a Body Mass Index of 24.

When I married in 1983, I entered the ring at 180 pounds and was running 25 miles a week. Complaining knees and the time demands of fatherhood and business added a couple of pounds a year: "*Voila!*"—250.

Doc told me to slow my rate of weight loss and spread the next lift over two years rather than six months. That, however, requires more patience than I have. I'd lose the momentum of decline. I know that sticking at 185 pounds will be harder than getting there.

I'm going to hang a few thoughts about America's food system on my own upsy-downsy story of weight.

Two camps of food opinion are at odds.

One defends conventional food, conventionally prepared, conventionally grown, conventionally processed and conventionally owned and organized. This camp believes that conventional food is good, good for you, good for the environment and good for all who participate in it—growers, processors, retailers, consumers and communities.

The other attacks conventional food, conventionally prepared, conventionally grown, conventionally processed and conventionally owned and organized. This camp believes that conventional food is bad, bad for you and bad for the environment but good for big growers, processors and retailers.

The defenders of convention have won the most important battles.

They have industrialized production agriculture to increase efficiency and control costs. Food processing and retailing have become highly concentrated industries with a handful of corporations controlling most of the business.

Big agriculture feeds big processors who feed big retailers who feed individual consumers. Small farmers, small processors and small retailers have been driven from the market. Big works—“Get big or get out.” is convention’s operational motto.

Political money and effective lobbying have limited public regulation of conventional Big Food over safety, antitrust enforcement and biotechnology innovations. The big guys generally get pretty much what they want.

The other side -- as set forth by Eric Schlosser ([Fast Food Nation](#)), David Kessler ([The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite](#)), and Wenonah Hauter ([Foodopoly](#)), among many others -- argues for small and medium-scale agriculture, local sourcing, organic and whole-food products, farmer-to-eater marketing and dismemberment of the giants in the agriculture-food-industrial complex.

Organic food and locally produced food constitute tiny fractions of the \$1.2 trillion we spend annually on conventional food purchases. That shows what America buys. It also shows, I think, that “rich folks” -- a term so broad that I include myself -- are the only ones able to feed themselves the more expensive alternative foods that are claimed to be healthier even when they contain more calories.

I’m certainly disposed to the side urging smaller scales, decentralization, local sources, independent businesses, safety, health and organic this and that. We gladly buy grass-fed beef and organic veggies from our local farmer’s market. We also buy at chain supermarkets.

But my disposition doesn't eclipse the obvious fact that foods fitting this profile are not a feasible, affordable steady diet for those who can't buy them.

Convention produces sufficient affordable food each year to feed adequately most of us. It's mostly safe, though much of it is processed with too much fat, sugar and salt.

It's obvious that the big guys achieve affordability by paying low wages through the entire farm-to-consumer system, working large volumes at low margins and externalizing safety and environmental costs.

I don't see how the alternative model can produce sufficient affordable food each year to feed adequately most of us.

Wenonah Hauter, executive director of the public-interest advocacy organization Food & Water Watch (www.foodandwaterwatch.org), would have government break up every large organization involved in the food chain with the idea that smaller organizations will produce better outcomes in terms of food safety and food wholesomeness.

I'm skeptical that small farms, small processors and small retailers necessarily produce safer and healthier food. I've seen small companies produce bad products. She doesn't ask whether small organizations will produce food that is cheaper, equivalent to or more expensive than food from large corporations in concentrated industries.

Mature industries in market economies move toward bigness and concentration. When giants were parted out in the past, the parts kept getting bigger. Standard Oil's division into 33 pieces in 1911 left us with two direct survivors, ExxonMobil and Chevron. The others were incorporated into rivals like BP, Sunoco and Marathon Petroleum. These are not exactly examples of Mom-and-Pop oil companies.

Antitrust enforcement would, I think, inevitably produce more expensive food, which would affect those below our median income a lot more than those above.

If the price of items at Whole Foods is a rough indicator, wholesome, organic products are anywhere from 25 to 50% more costly than their conventional peers. The bottom fifth of our population would be priced out of eating if Whole Foods alone supplied our food. The next highest fifth would be hungry. The middle fifth would lose weight.

I've become increasingly skeptical of the locally sourced/organic missionaries. They seem to concentrate in large cities or university towns where they have numerous choices and the money to buy what they want.

Organic food is not necessarily safer than conventional food, though it should be. It depends on how it's been produced and processed.

Organic spinach and organic chicken can be as contaminated with *Salmonella* as conventional spinach and conventional chicken since both organic and non-organic feces can carry this bacteria.

Some years ago, I bought several whole chickens from a farm in a neighboring county that's run by a prominent organic-meat advocate. He processed the chickens in his backyard next to a populated cattle pasture. There was -- and could be -- no fly control, and water, as I recall, came from a garden hose into plastic bins. His chickens did not make me sick, and neither have the hundreds of conventionally raised and processed chickens that I've eaten—but both could have.

Similarly, organic food is not necessarily healthier than non-organic food. Organic fat, organic salt and organic sugar are still fat, salt and sugar.

I understand that there's more to healthy food than low calories. But I also understand that obesity is a far larger problem for our society than theoretical cancers from food additives or genetically modified corn and soy beans fed to cattle and pigs.

If appropriate caloric content is a simple marker for healthy food, a 1,000-calorie, scrupulously organic blueberry muffin is less healthy than a 500-calorie, non-organic blueberry muffin even if you count in the latter's artificial ingredients and refined constituents.

Or put another way. A young-to-middle-aged obese eater on a totally organic, whole-food, sustainably produced, environmentally conscious and locally sourced diet has the same shortened life expectancy of almost a decade as a similar obese eater on a totally non-organic, processed-food diet that comes from big farms, through big processors and sold through big supermarket chains. It's calories more than additives, genetic engineering, processing, globalization, concentration and corporations that produce bad health outcomes.

At least one other writer whose sympathies are with the organics takes up the gadfly role—David H. Freedman, “How Junk Food Can End Obesity,” *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2013. He argues that Big Food should quietly rework their products to make them lower in calories and still taste good, and forget about converting Americans into evangelists for straight kale.

Making food safer and healthier and keeping it affordable are tasks that involve working with Huter's corporate targets. The locally sourced, wholesome small-scale movement has already forced change on the food giants. Fast-food companies are reducing calories without publicizing it and offering alternatives to their caloric whoppers. Chain supermarkets have

embraced alternative products that are low-calorie, or organic or locally sourced, because they are profitable.

One hopes that a future White House and Congress will be more aggressive in regulating demonstrated safety problems, adding inspectors and vetting new chemicals and processes.

I realize that near hysteria over each and every food issue works to focus public pressure on reluctant regulators and Big Food corporations. But Hauter's book made me think of the end-of-the-world prophets. Some of her opinions seem well-founded, but others -- her dismissal of irradiation, for example -- seem firmly rooted in a generalized Doomsdayism and a somewhat paranoid fear of the future and technology.

Maybe Hauter's right—that everything in the conventional food system is a mortal danger, a poison and a corporate rip-off, but I don't think she is.

Still, if you're trying to lose weight, food as calories is an enemy and should be evaluated in terms of needs, not wants. Alternative food that's high in calories is just as much an enemy as conventional food that's high in calories.

Less is not more; less is good enough.

Bon appétit.