

Time to End Industrial Cuisine

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The Age, Op-Ed, 27/12/1997

The findings of the *National Nutrition Survey* released this week have highlighted the growing percentage of over-weight and obese people in Australia “despite” the millions of dollars currently being spent promoting healthy diets and regular exercise.

The study identified the high consumption of take away foods, pre-prepared foods, meat and dairy products, and the under-consumption of vegetables, legumes, grains and fruit, as contributing to a number of diet related health problems.

These results have already led to calls for more public education programs that promote healthier diets. But, it is questionable whether any more of the same kind of advice being dished out by nutritionists is likely to have any significant influence on these trends.

A clear distinction needs to be drawn between ‘wholefoods’ and ‘industrial foods’, and that the main message of any dietary advice should simply be that we shift away from industrial foods towards more wholefoods based diets. A wholefoods diet is defined here as consisting of plenty of grains, vegetables, greens, legumes, dairy products, real bread, fruit, and relatively little meat. Most traditional/peasant cuisines from around the world provide good examples of healthy and balanced wholefoods diets.

Industrial diets, on the other hand, are characterised by the over-consumption of meat (red or white) and growing levels of consumption of processed, pre-prepared and fast foods. These industrial foods tend to be high in sugar, salt and fat content, as well as a range of chemical additives.

However, the current emphasis on the nutritional breakdown and analysis of food that is promoted by nutritionists may actually be hindering rather than encouraging any such shift from industrial foods to wholefoods. This is because most nutritional advice tends not to make any such clear-cut distinction between wholefoods and industrial foods, but instead gives the impression that there are both good *and* bad wholefoods, and even good and bad industrial foods, depending on the particular quantities of nutrients they contain.

Nutritional science engages with food at the abstract level of its chemical compounds and constituents. At the chemical level, foods are understood in terms of such abstract nutritional categories as vitamins, minerals, saturated and unsaturated fats, calories, cholesterol, proteins, carbohydrates, and kilojoules. Similarly, at this level our bodies are understood as having nutritional ‘requirements’ in terms of quantifiable amounts of these nutritional categories.

The scientific management of nutrition emphasises quantification and a calculating approach to diet and health. Witness the contemporary obsession with counting calories and cholesterol levels. These abstract categories are supposed to reveal the underlying ‘truth’ of one’s health, and are meant to be measured and managed for optimum results. The implication is that in order to eat a balanced and healthy diet, one *needs* to have an understanding of the nutritional constituents of foods, and to assemble the appropriate balance of these nutrients. This can include consuming these nutrients directly in the form of vitamin supplements or fortified processed foods.

On the basis of this chemical level of understanding, certain wholefoods have been singled out as ‘wonder-foods’ to be celebrated, while other wholefoods have been

vilified. For example, fish, olive oil and some vegetables are celebrated because they contain a high concentration of some nutrient deemed desirable, or produce a beneficial chemical reaction in the body which they have managed to identify.

At the same time, wholefoods such as dairy products and eggs are considered suspect, and even 'unhealthy', because they contain "too much" fat or cholesterol, even though some of the healthiest peasant cuisines in the world are rich in these foods. As a result, milk and some other wholefoods are now processed to remove or enhance certain nutritional elements, such as fat or protein, in order to reflect the latest nutritional advice.

The good/bad food distinction is therefore not being used by nutritionists to clearly distinguish between wholefoods and industrial foods, but is instead being used to create a nutritional hierarchy of different types of wholefoods. In this way, we tend to lose faith in the simple goodness of all wholefoods, and are even made to feel guilty for eating some of these foods.

More importantly, at the chemical level of understanding, the qualitative distinction between wholefoods and industrial foods is essentially erased. For at this level, all foods are understood in terms of the various quantities of nutrients they contain.

At the chemical level, even processed foods may be considered healthy, or healthier than wholefoods, if they contain the desired quantities of some nutrients. Many processed foods now come with nutritional claims such as 'no cholesterol', 'fat-reduced', 'high fibre' and 'vitamin enriched' in order to reflect the latest nutritional fetishes.

Those who believe in the truth of these nutritional categories, and focus primarily on this way of understanding food, may end up eating *more* rather than less industrial foods in an attempt to construct a healthier, more balanced diet. The abstract-nutritional level of understanding has in fact led to a great deal of confusion as to what people think they should be eating, rather than offering clear guidelines for the perplexed. It has also played into the hands of the food processing industry by providing them with a powerful tool for marketing their products.