

Dinner party from hell

By John Mason, FT.com site
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Devising a dinner party menu was never easy. But today's welter of nutritional advice, food scares and special diets can make it pure hell on wheels.

Whatever the truth about the safety of farmed salmon, is it a wise choice if you are aiming for a relaxed and convivial evening? Even if it tastes great, what risk it might push the conversation into an argument about lifestyle and health so sanctimonious, fractious and judgmental that everyone wishes they had stayed at home.

Is beef still questionable and best avoided in the interest of overall harmony? Will guests remember past warnings over soft cheese and listeria? The questions over what to serve appear endless.

Some decisions are, of course, a no-brainer. A friend with an allergy to seafood that is guaranteed to close down their respiratory system and demand the instant summoning of an ambulance has plainly to be accommodated.

But most decisions over food safety and nutrition are less clear cut. How can one menu reconcile the tastes of the traditional English trencherman with those of an Atkins diet devotee guaranteed to end any meal with all carbohydrates defiantly piled at the side of the plate?

The problem repeats itself in the supermarket when doing the weekly shop. We sift through a mix of half-remembered media messages, word-of-mouth nuggets of advice and the normal mix of prejudices about the best way to survive life. Sometimes we reach for the salads. At other times we lose patience and defiantly apply the pleasure principle in filling our baskets.

If it is any comfort, even the experts freely confess to finding it daunting. Sue Davies, policy director of the Consumer Association, says: "It is difficult. There are cases where advice is straightforward; such as eating raw eggs (which can cause salmonella poisoning) or following the advice to eat more fruit and vegetables. But when there is uncertainty or a balance to be struck, it can be very difficult."

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University, is more trenchant, as one might expect from a man who will not allow meat in his house and cycles the London streets in search of food he considers nutritious and environmentally sound.

Of basic nutrition rather than specific food scares, he says: "At an individual level, it is becoming harder and harder. With the avalanche of new products and inadequate labeling it is often almost impossible for people to make informed decisions."

His personal response is to get back to basics. "We have people coming round tonight. They are arriving late, so we are not doing a three-course meal. It will be lentil soup, bread and fruit," he explains.

The difficulty lies in knowing who to believe, or whether to believe anyone at all in what seems to be such an inexact science. Take the most recent scares. The warnings over Scottish farmed salmon; that it contained the highest levels of industrial contaminants in the world; meant it should be eaten no more than one every two months, argued US scientists.

Rubbish, responded this country's Food Standards Agency (FSA), which stuck by its advice that the benefits of eating a food high in fatty acids which help prevent heart disease outweighed any disadvantage.

Consumers, in this case, seemed unphased, despite a tidal wave of media coverage. Why remains unclear, as even Sir John Krebs, FSA chairman, admits: "Either consumers are so fatigued that they ignore these messages completely or, amid a welter of noise, there was a trusted voice they turned to."

Stepping back to ask big questions about the safety of our food does not necessarily shed the light we crave. Is it becoming more dangerous to eat? Or is it that our attitudes have changed as we have become increasingly risk-averse. There are no easy answers.

The health dangers from food have certainly changed over time. Some have largely disappeared such as the bacterial threat of consuming raw milk from cows suffering from tuberculosis, a significant cause of death in the 1930s. Other long-established and potentially deadly causes of poisoning such as e-coli or salmonella survive. Their causes, often poor hygiene standards in handling, are well-understood but seemingly impossible to eradicate.

Many of the new threats to have emerged are from industrializations such as contamination by industrial by-products such as PCBs and dioxins. Perception is an issue here too science has improved, allowing for better

Detection of such substances but this, ironically, also increases the potential for greater public concern.

The industrialization of the food industry has also caused problems most notably with the BSE epidemic, caused by feeding meat and bone meal to herbivore cattle. Its jumping the species barrier to infect humans and guarantee them a particularly appalling death provoked the deepest loss of public confidence in industry and food regulators.

The UK's BSE epidemic in cattle has peaked, human deaths leveled off and consumer confidence in beef returned to pre-crisis levels. But the problem has not gone away entirely. Scientists remain concerned by the possibility the disease could emerge in sheep. Although the risk is thought only a theoretical one, uncertainty remains. Should we eat lamb? Yes, until we say otherwise, is the FSA advice.

Sir John Krebs insists that overall, our food is safer now than before the Second World War. People are wrong to hark back to some romanticized past of rosy-cheeked small farmers producing problem-free food. In the 1930s food poisoning was rife, he points out, while in the 19th century the rural poor often starved.

"I am not pro-industry, but in general the industrialization of food production has been associated with higher standards. The controls are rigorous," he says. One success story would be the reduction in salmonella in eggs, which is now far lower than in the 1980s, "but this does not mean things don't go wrong as with BSE," he accepts.

Others disagree fundamentally. Prof Lang believes industrialization of the food industry and consumers demands for cheap food lie at the very core of modern safety problems. "The food revolution of the past 50 years has been about increasing productivity and efficiency and lowering prices. That is why we get the scares," he says.

At the heart of the problem is an increasing conflict between food production and a healthy environment. Salmon farming is a prime example since three times as much wild fish is consumed as feed than produced by the farms.

"Time and time again scares are about the interface between humans and the environment. The reason why food is at the forefront is because it is like the canary taken down the mines, we eat the environment all the time," he says.

Faced with such brutal disagreement among experts, what should consumers do? There is at least some consensus. Long-term worrying about basic nutrition is far more useful than short-term anxiety over the latest scare headlines. Second, there is some agreement over the outlines of a good basic diet. Third, we British are woefully bad at turning talk into action and improving our diets. Fourth, successive governments, including the current one, have paid scant attention to promoting healthy eating.

Current exhortations to eat more fruit and vegetables and less fat and sugar and drink more water may be repetitive and boring, but are the most important ones to observe, says Sir John. "Salmonella, listeria, and e-coli account for about 500 deaths a year, BSE currently about 20 and pesticides and genetically-modified foods none. It is the ones people don't think about cancers and coronary heart disease where diet contributes to 100,000 deaths a year," he argues.

The core advice from the FSA still commands widespread acceptance, eat more fruit and vegetables, at least five portions a day, more cereals and bread (preferably high fiber),

which should form one third of your diet, only moderate amounts of meat, and fish twice a week. Intakes of saturated fats, salt and sugar are best reduced.

Specific groups of vulnerable still need to pay special attention to avoid risks. The old, sick and young infants remain more at risk from salmonella while pregnant women should concentrate on increasing intake of iron and folic acid and avoid hazardous foods such as soft cheese.

The FSA advice is to be seen as a considerable improvement on what went before, when poor regulation contributed to the spread of BSE. However, it does not go totally unchallenged. Typical is the continuing stand-off between the agency and the organic movement over Sir John's reluctance to back claims there are significant health advantages to eating organic food.

The organic movement continues to question official assumptions about the safe limits for pesticides, particularly the "cocktail effect" of different chemicals interacting, which is almost impossible to assess scientifically.

The problem here is that conclusive evidence over the health claims for organics is largely impossible to obtain. There is no clear organic market to monitor and the timescales for proper studies prohibitively long. However, the organic movement argues evidence is steadily mounting that its food contains fewer toxins and more beneficial vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients. On this issue, consumers are left to make up their minds on the basis of value judgments and inadequate scientific information. But, such disagreements aside, the biggest problem remains the inescapable fact that we are not changing our behavior. All monitoring of fruit and vegetable consumption shows the government's campaign is falling far short of success; generally we consume little more than half what is recommended. The obesity rate, with one in five officially overweight, Britain is the fattest nation in the world after the US, is another emphatic pointer.

This remains the main issue, says Sue Davies of the Consumers' Association. However, she admits that, when it comes to food, the devil often still plays the best tunes. "The healthy choice is often the more difficult one. It is easier to go for the unhealthy option," she adds.

Among the poor, the problem is particularly great. "When you live close to the edge, there is less choice anyway and the poor are more concerned with the basics of survival than the niceties of food scares or healthy eating," says Sir John.

However, there are a few green shoots of encouragement. An active interest in improving diet is starting to build, at least among the better off. "We are seeing a shift among more affluent consumers people are now more concerned about diet and health than traditional food safety," he says.

Sir John draws from personal experience. A reunion of old college alumni he attended was dominated by talk of healthy eating. "The baby-boomers are realizing they are not

immortal but want to remain active. People of my age aspire to another 25 years of active life. We are not thinking of throwing in the towel yet," Sir John, who is 58 explains.

Food scares will not go away. Increased international trade in food will continue to throw up problems such as contamination. Animal diseases have always crossed into humans and will continue to do so as the current avian flu crisis demonstrates. Mainstream opinion and that of the FSA is that industrial food production can be effectively controlled by good science and transparent communication with the public. Consumers should listen to the quiet voices of reason when making their personal decisions, argued Sir John.

Prof Lang is less optimistic. There is no doubt that people need the fatty acids found in oily fish like salmon, but these are also found in nuts and seeds. The salmon scare showed the need for bigger thinking by governments and for consumers to increasingly face up to the consequences of their purchasing decisions.

"Waiting in the wings is the problem of ecology and human health. There is not a nutritionist who doesn't say eat oily fish and there is not an ecologist who doesn't say stop eating fish. That is a major problem. There will be more scares and you never know where the damage will rebound", he predicted.

He is unashamed about his lentil lifestyle. "The Mediterranean peasant diet is simple, healthy and ecologically sound. What the consumer can do is return to simple food, cooked at home", he insists.

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