

# Experts offer contradictory advice

## The new diets: What are the effects of our food fads?

This is the fourth in a series of 15 articles exploring "Food and People." In this article, Sam Keen, editor of Psychology Today's report on "The New Food Consciousness," discusses how our food fads reflect wider social values. This series was written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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By Sam Keen  
special writer

These days if you are not confused about what to eat, you don't understand the situation.

A generation ago, before cholesterol, before scientists discovered that a great many substances fed to rats in sufficient quantities cause cancer, we innocently ate our meat, potatoes and lettuce and considered ourselves well fed.

Nowadays, a gaggle of experts offer contradictory advice on what we should eat and why. No meat, say the vegetarians and low-cholesterol buffs. All the fattening food you want, says diet doctor Robert C. Atkins, but beware of carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates, little or no meat, says Frances Lappe. Not unless it's organic, says the Rodales.

Nonsense, a carrot can't tell manufactured fertilizer from horse manure, say the agribusiness experts. Besides the specialists on nutrition, we have a yearly crop of uncredentialed, self-proclaimed experts on weight-loss diets, each with a scheme to deliver us from the evil of fat without having to resist the temptation to overeat.

Even the government is in on the act. In 1977 the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs released a set of dietary goals: more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, less sugar, fat and salt.

The confusion about the right food is one aspect of our broader cultural self-examination. Our values, ideals, visions, myths, heroes and lifestyles are in a fertile, but chaotic, ferment. The question underlying "What's to eat?" is "How should we live?"

Food is a mirror, a Rorschach inkblot test that



food and people

reflects our value choices. Examine what you eat, with whom, how fast and why, and you can get a rough idea of your personality type and world view. What kind of an eater are you? Here are some of the "ideal types" — somewhat exaggerated perhaps — that are most evident today:

### TRADITIONAL EATERS

In the heartlands of America, the traditional folk still eat their square meals — meat and potatoes (with gravy), wilted salads and apple pie. In South Dakota, "home cooking" means steak, eggs and pancakes for breakfast, just as it did a generation ago when heavy meals and mesomorphic bodies were necessary for heavy ranch work.

Traditional eaters take their food and their values without questions. They want things plain and neat, the way they have always been. Men are head of the household, and women do the cooking. Meals are still family affairs.

They eat with relish but little imagination. No pheasant under glass or escargot. They generally pay little attention to how food affects their bodies or to the sensory delights of eating.

### SPEED EATERS

Speed eaters have replaced traditional eaters as the most common American type. We are a nation of what has been called "Type A personalities" — restless, on the go, stress eaters. We eat fast-food burgers and sugary snacks on the run.

We are addicted to high-energy speed foods, sugars and carbohydrates, caffeine and fats. According to a recent U.S. government survey, the average American consumes 130 pounds of refined processed sugars per year. We like life sweet and fast.

The majority of speed eaters takes its values, like its TV dinners, prepackaged. Most of us don't question preprocessed food, the safety of the 1,800 chemical additives that are used to enhance the flavor and increase the shelf life of food, the farming methods of agribusiness, or the corporate control of

the price, type and quality of foods in the supermarkets.

The consumption of fast and preprocessed foods coincides with devaluing cooking, eating and homemaking and with the rise of divorce rate. Dad and mom are both busy with work and individual success to waste time preparing elaborate meals. A whole array of fast-food chains and instant foods helps those who have no time to savor or waste.

Speed eaters believe in technology, efficiency, progress, the capitalistic status quo, upward mobility, the urban perspective, working mothers.

### GOURMET EATERS

Gourmet eaters are what Jung called sensation types. They pay loving attention to sizzling fresh peas in garlic sauce, flowers arranged just so in a vase, the texture of an artist's brush stroke. They are not necessarily snobs, but they have highly cultivated tastes with a commitment to enjoy Japanese sushi (raw fish) no less than French truffles.

Their world is a smorgasbord of flavors. They enjoy the luxury of being hedonists, and they are more apt to be outraged at the aesthetics of fried clams, fried potatoes, fried onion rings, than by the specter of world hunger.

### RADICAL EATERS

Radical eaters never take an unpolitical bite. They follow a calorie-efficient "Diet for a Small Planet," boycotting nonunion lettuce and grapes. They look with prophetic eyes at the exploitative practices of agribusiness and the food industry and want "Food for People, Not for Profit." They object to the State Department's view that food is a diplomatic weapon.

Their insatiable hunger for justice often leads them to ignore their diets and to forget to savor the simple joy of a glass of wine, a book of verse and a thou.

### DIETERS

Dieters eat and don't eat for reasons that have little to do with nutrition or the enjoyment of food. The dieter exists in a cycle of splurge-purge, self-indulgence and guilt. The chronic consumer of food or things, what Freud called the oral-dependent personality, is always eating or buying substitutes for a deep-seated need for love.

Having eaten too often but not too well, the chronic consumer runs up against the American prejudice against fat. So the consumer turns dieter to shape the personal into the desirable thin image

to get the approval, love and satisfaction that were not experienced in the food.

Each year, consumer-dieters read the new best seller on how to lose weight without nasty exercise or self-denial. In short, the chronic consumer-dieter exists in a frustrated world of unconscious needs and fantasized pleasures that never nourish or delight the real self.

### HEALTH-FOOD EATERS

Health-food eaters are automatically considered food faddists by traditional and speed eaters. In fact, health-food eaters are part of a new, worldwide romantic trend to search for a more "natural" way of life.

The new enthusiasm for whole wheat bread, fresh vegetables and unprocessed food is a symbol of the desire to get away from our prepackaged, institutionalized, profit-dominated culture and to return to the land — to pure air, clean water and rich humus.

In the "natural" scheme of things, food is not a commodity so much as a gift of the earth. Farming is not a business but a nearly sacramental way of life — living in communion with the land. Health food is a wafers, a symbol taken in hope for a more healthy, whole, holy way of living.

STILL CONFUSED about what to eat? Sorry. Neither scientists, nutritionists nor philosophers can tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about food. Unlike cattle, human beings can't be fed a standard, scientifically optimal diet, because our eating expresses our values and our philosophy of life.

Food is about consumption and communion. (Who eats and who remains hungry?) And sacrifice. (Whose blood is shed for you when you eat a medium-rare sirloin?)

It is about service and caretaking. (Who cooks and why?) It is about tasting or gobbling the world, living lean or as a fat cat. It is about whether life is a business or a festival of thanksgiving and sharing.

If we lack the one true answer about food, perhaps we have something better — an interesting question. If, as the old proverb says, "You are what you eat," who are you?

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Next week, Johanna Dwyer, a nutritionist at Tufts Medical School, discusses "Food and the American Way of Life."



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