

Directions: Analyze each article for main idea, supporting details, rhetorical appeals, and rhetorical devices

Is Junk Food Really Cheaper?

Mark Bittman SEPT. 24, 2011

THE “fact” that junk food is cheaper than real food has become a reflexive part of how we explain why so many Americans are overweight, particularly those with lower incomes. I frequently read confident statements like, “when a bag of chips is cheaper than a head of broccoli ...” or “it’s more affordable to feed a family of four at McDonald’s than to cook a healthy meal for them at home.”

This is just plain wrong. In fact it isn’t cheaper to eat highly processed food: a typical order for a family of four — for example, two Big Macs, a cheeseburger, six chicken McNuggets, two medium and two small fries, and two medium and two small sodas — costs, at the McDonald’s a hundred steps from where I write, about \$28. (Judicious ordering of “Happy Meals” can reduce that to about \$23 — and you get a few apple slices in addition to the fries!)

In general, despite extensive government subsidies, hyperprocessed food remains more expensive than food cooked at home. You can serve a roasted chicken with vegetables along with a simple salad and milk for about \$14, and feed four or even six people. If that’s too much money, substitute a meal of rice and canned beans with bacon, green peppers and onions; it’s easily enough for four people and costs about \$9. (Omitting the bacon, using dried beans, which are also lower in sodium, or substituting carrots for the peppers reduces the price further, of course.)

Another argument runs that junk food is cheaper when measured by the calorie, and that this makes fast food essential for the poor because they need cheap calories. But given that half of the people in this country (and a higher percentage of poor people) consume too many calories rather than too few, measuring food’s value by the calorie makes as much sense as measuring a drink’s value by its alcohol content. (Why not drink 95 percent neutral grain spirit, the cheapest way to get drunk?)

Besides, that argument, even if we all needed to gain weight, is not always true. A meal of real food cooked at home can easily contain more calories, most of them of the “healthy” variety. (Olive oil accounts for many of the calories in the roast chicken meal, for example.) In comparing prices of real food and junk food, I used supermarket ingredients, not the pricier organic or local food that many people would consider ideal. But food choices are not black and white; the alternative to fast food is not necessarily organic food, any more than the alternative to soda is Bordeaux.

The alternative to soda is water, and the alternative to junk food is not grass-fed beef and greens from a trendy farmers’ market, but anything other than junk food: rice, grains, pasta, beans, fresh vegetables, canned vegetables, frozen vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, bread, peanut butter, a thousand other things cooked at home — in almost every case a far superior alternative.

“Anything that you do that’s not fast food is terrific; cooking once a week is far better than not cooking at all,” says Marion Nestle, professor of food studies at New York University and author of “What to Eat.” “It’s the same argument as exercise: more is better than less and some is a lot better than none.”

THE fact is that most people can afford real food. Even the nearly 50 million Americans who are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) receive about \$5 per person per day, which is far from ideal but enough to survive. So we have to assume that money alone doesn’t guide decisions about what to eat. There are, of course, the so-called food deserts, places where it’s hard to find food: the Department of Agriculture says that more than two million Americans in low-income rural areas live 10 miles or more from a

supermarket, and more than five million households without access to cars live more than a half mile from a supermarket.

Still, 93 percent of those with limited access to supermarkets do have access to vehicles, though it takes them 20 more minutes to travel to the store than the national average. And after a long day of work at one or even two jobs, 20 extra minutes — plus cooking time — must seem like an eternity.

Taking the long route to putting food on the table may not be easy, but for almost all Americans it remains a choice, and if you can drive to McDonald's you can drive to Safeway. It's cooking that's the real challenge. (The real challenge is not "I'm too busy to cook." In 2010 the average American, regardless of weekly earnings, watched no less than an hour and a half of television per day. The time is there.)

The core problem is that cooking is defined as work, and fast food is both a pleasure and a crutch. "People really are stressed out with all that they have to do, and they don't want to cook," says Julie Guthman, associate professor of community studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of the forthcoming "Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice and the Limits of Capitalism." "Their reaction is, 'Let me enjoy what I want to eat, and stop telling me what to do.' And it's one of the few things that less well-off people have: they don't have to cook."

It's not just about choice, however, and rational arguments go only so far, because money and access and time and skill are not the only considerations. The ubiquity, convenience and habit-forming appeal of hyperprocessed foods have largely drowned out the alternatives: there are five fast-food restaurants for every supermarket in the United States; in recent decades the adjusted for inflation price of fresh produce has increased by 40 percent while the price of soda and processed food has decreased by as much as 30 percent; and nearly inconceivable resources go into encouraging consumption in restaurants: fast-food companies spent \$4.2 billion on marketing in 2009.

Furthermore, the engineering behind hyperprocessed food makes it virtually addictive. A 2009 study by the Scripps Research Institute indicates that overconsumption of fast food "triggers addiction-like neuroaddictive responses" in the brain, making it harder to trigger the release of dopamine. In other words the more fast food we eat, the more we need to give us pleasure; thus the report suggests that the same mechanisms underlie drug addiction and obesity.

This addiction to processed food is the result of decades of vision and hard work by the industry. For 50 years, says David A. Kessler, former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration and author of "The End of Overeating," companies strove to create food that was "energy-dense, highly stimulating, and went down easy. They put it on every street corner and made it mobile, and they made it socially acceptable to eat anytime and anywhere. They created a food carnival, and that's where we live. And if you're used to self-stimulation every 15 minutes, well, you can't run into the kitchen to satisfy that urge."

Real cultural changes are needed to turn this around. Somehow, no-nonsense cooking and eating — roasting a chicken, making a grilled cheese sandwich, scrambling an egg, tossing a salad — must become popular again, and valued not just by hipsters in Brooklyn or locavores in Berkeley. The smart campaign is not to get McDonald's to serve better food but to get people to see cooking as a joy rather than a burden, or at least as part of a normal life.

As with any addictive behavior, this one is most easily countered by educating children about the better way. Children, after all, are born without bad habits. And yet it's adults who must begin to tear down the food carnival.

The question is how? Efforts are everywhere. The People's Grocery in Oakland secures affordable groceries for low-income people. Zoning laws in Los Angeles restrict the number of fast-food restaurants in high-obesity neighborhoods. There's the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a successful Pennsylvania program to build fresh food outlets in underserved areas, now being expanded nationally. FoodCorps and Cooking Matters teach young people how to farm and cook.

As Malik Yakini, executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, says, "We've seen minor successes, but the food movement is still at the infant stage, and we need a massive social shift to convince people to consider healthier options."

HOW do you change a culture? The answers, not surprisingly, are complex. "Once I look at what I'm eating," says Dr. Kessler, "and realize it's not food, and I ask 'what am I doing here?' that's the start. It's not about whether I think it's good for me, it's about changing how I feel. And we change how people feel by changing the environment."

Obviously, in an atmosphere where any regulation is immediately labeled "nanny statism," changing "the environment" is difficult. But we've done this before, with tobacco. The 1998 tobacco settlement limited cigarette marketing and forced manufacturers to finance anti-smoking campaigns — a negotiated change that led to an environmental one that in turn led to a cultural one, after which kids said to their parents, "I wish you didn't smoke." Smoking had to be converted from a cool habit into one practiced by pariahs.

A similar victory in the food world is symbolized by the stories parents tell me of their kids booing as they drive by McDonald's.

To make changes like this more widespread we need action both cultural and political. The cultural lies in celebrating real food; raising our children in homes that don't program them for fast-produced, eaten-on-the-run, high-calorie, low-nutrition junk; giving them the gift of appreciating the pleasures of nourishing one another and enjoying that nourishment together.

Political action would mean agitating to limit the marketing of junk; forcing its makers to pay the true costs of production; recognizing that advertising for fast food is not the exercise of free speech but behavior manipulation of addictive substances; and making certain that real food is affordable and available to everyone. The political challenge is the more difficult one, but it cannot be ignored.

What's easier is to cook at every opportunity, to demonstrate to family and neighbors that the real way is the better way. And even the more fun way: kind of like a carnival.

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