

Science For Chefs

The recent appearance on NBC's *Today* show of nutritionist Joy Bauer telling viewers which organic items to buy and which conventional items not to buy because of relatively high pesticide levels illustrates part of a cultural penchant for saying things for which there is no evidence.

Ms. Bauer told viewers it pained her "as a nutritionist" to advise it, but consumers who couldn't or didn't get organically grown potatoes should peel potatoes before eating them.

This was fascinating because the reason this advice was difficult to give "as a nutritionist" was that she was acknowledging the substantial, valuable nutrients a consumer would lose by peeling the skin. Yet Ms. Bauer was asserting the danger of pesticide residue in the potato was sufficiently large to outweigh any benefit derived from the skin.

But she doesn't know that. Nobody knows because there has never been a peer-reviewed, randomized, double-blind, lifetime-length, human study on the issue.

As she revealed her list of the "dirty dozen" produce items one should buy organically grown versions of, this representative of the science of nutrition said pesticide residue on these items "can't be good for us."

Real scientists, however, don't talk that way. "Can't be good for us" is a surmise based on nothing. We know it is based on nothing because if Ms. Bauer had evidence some particular level of pesticide wasn't good for us, she would, presumably, tell the relevant authorities and they would change the allowed level. But that would require her to give more than an emotive grunt, to actually have a methodology, to actually have done studies, to actually know something instead of jabbering on TV to sell diet books and her nutrition services company.

Life is a series of trade-offs. My brother had heard X-rays might cause cancer so when he went to the dentist, he declined to get X-rays. One day, severe pain in a tooth required an immediate implant. When my brother asked the dentist how such a severe thing could come out of nowhere, the dentist pointed out that with X-rays, they might have been able to deal with the problem when it was small and avoid the implant.

My brother was not wrong about X-rays.

Scientists universally acknowledge X-rays are dangerous; that is why they give you lead aprons, don't let pregnant women in the room, etc. My brother, smart though he is, was not weighing the relative costs and benefits of getting regular dental X-rays versus the risks of not getting them. Maybe the acute risk of an implant procedure outweighs the risk of increased cancer. Or maybe you get cancer from having foreign substances such as implants in your body?

But my brother is allowed to make these trade-offs and judgments for himself. The reason Joy Bauer is a menace to society and a threat to public health is that she assumes the mantle of a nutritionist and then purports to tell millions of viewers what to do.

This has almost nothing to do with the relative merits of buying organics. Organic consumption is booming, but key purchasing motivators are increasingly related to issues of environmental sustainability, not to health claims, for which there is just no evidence. If an individual wants to eat organically grown fresh produce in the pursuit of better health, more power to him. There are many things in life we do not have definitive information about, but "you pay your money and you take your chances."

If the issue were simply a penchant for saying things without scientific support, one would expect the falsehoods to break equally on all sides of the arguments. But the chatter breaks decidedly to the politically correct side instead of the science-based side.

As the produce industry gathers in Monterey for the 25th anniversary of PMA's Foodservice Conference, it is worth thinking about the next stage in produce outreach for foodservice: to the individual chef.

These people are so interesting and so engaging, their enjoyment of fine food and wine so captivating, it is easy to forget they too share an elitist culture in which science is not very important. It is asserted as a matter of course that locally grown and organically grown produce tastes better than other produce — although no randomized, double-blind, peer-reviewed studies prove this.

Locally grown is asserted to be better for the world, but they don't bother to counter-balance how imports may produce jobs for very poor people. And though many of



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these chefs can produce exceptional food, it comes at a price. And they have few if any answers for how the masses shall be fed.

The conventional produce industry and even the mass-market organic industry have significant stakes in changing the culture these chefs inhabit, to nudge them toward a science-based standard of assessment, to get them to include benefits such as inexpensive food in their calculations of utility.

The produce industry confronts foodservice with a lack of imagination. We need to do more than help develop new recipes. We need to help chefs understand the benefits this industry brings to the world.

The Nucci Scholarship for Culinary Innovation program is a great way to start. By reaching out to individual students from The Culinary Institute of America, we begin an outreach that has been desperately needed.

These chefs don't have corporate positions where they will serve on the PMA board. They will probably never buy direct from a shipper. They may not even use a foodservice distributor, buying instead from purveyors under the trade's radar screen. But by exposing young student chefs to the trade, we open up the possibility of communication. And peer influence is key in establishing a culture.

Innovation takes many forms and, maybe, this effort can also lead to new ways of thinking.

Joe Nucci specialized in that.

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