

TWO CHEERS FOR BACON

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Each July, the industry's attention turns to foodservice, as PMA's annual Foodservice Conference is held, and so all eyes turn to the pledge, made jointly by the Produce Marketing Association, the National Restaurant Association and the International Foodservice Distributors Association, to double produce consumption in 10 years. The pledge was made in 2009, so we are now three years in, and the

one thing we can say for sure is that nobody has the foggiest idea whether any progress has been made toward reaching the announced goal. No research was ever done to establish a baseline usage number, so we are left with highly suspect research metrics, such as the number of mentions of produce on menus, to use as a proxy for usage.

The National Restaurant Association entered into the pledge enthusiastically with NRA chief Dawn Sweeney shrewdly seeing the alliance with PMA as a way of positioning the restaurant industry on the "side of the angels" in the public health controversy over the role restaurants play in the national obesity problem. Despite the enthusiasm, in fact the NRA has done virtually nothing to help achieve this goal. If a restaurant goes to the NRA homepage, it finds zero mention of the initiative, and even a search for the word "produce" brings up exactly two mentions in all of 2012 — a speech Sweeney gave to the PMA board of directors and a nutritionist mentioning some ideas for incorporating summer fruits and vegetables into summer menus.

Indeed, the NRA's efforts have been so miniscule that if one were a skeptic, one would surmise that the NRA couldn't care less about increasing produce consumption, but cares a great deal about being able to say it is in an alliance with the produce industry to boost produce consumption.

This actually makes a lot of sense. The NRA doesn't want restaurants to be blamed for obesity, but its members really care very little about whether they sell more or less produce. If consumers want seafood or pasta, restaurants are happy to sell those products, and they have no particular reason to want to persuade consumers to eat less of one thing and more of another.

The produce industry, of course, has substantial reason to want to sell more of its products, though there is some question as to whether

current strategies are likely to boost consumption. The long discussed merger between PMA and United seems likely to happen very soon, as industry leaders look to rationalize the trade's cost structure. Surely, the next focus of attention will be on the Produce for Better Health Foundation.

Whatever its one-time merits may have been, it is an organization that time has passed. There is just no evidence that its efforts are achieving anything at all. The reasons are many, but one is that the whole philosophy of promoting healthy eating may be inhibiting produce consumption. The day this column was being prepared, the home page of the Fruits and Veggies More Matters website featured

items such as "Healthy Eating Tips," "Healthy Desserts & Drinks" and "Healthy Summer Parties" — all this medicinal marketing is built around meals that not only have a lot of produce but also have restricted fat, sodium, sugar, etc., in line with the nutritional guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It is a nice ideal, and PBH is restricted in what it can promote by government funding sources,

so you can't blame the organization. But, bottom line, this is not going to increase produce consumption and, as such, this insistence on puritanical eating may not result in healthier diets.

Want to get children to eat more vegetables? Try adding cheese. We've had an extraordinary boom in consumption of Brussels sprouts over the past five years, and we can credit one very important ingredient: Bacon. All over the country, top chefs are adding pancetta, braising in bacon, topping with prosciutto bits, not to mention olive oil, Pecorino Romano, crumbled blue cheese and Parmesan.

There is so much attention paid nowadays to the idea that produce breeding programs need to be focused on producing flavor, and certainly nobody can argue with this — though the economics of the business mean that seasonality, yield and an ability to survive transit will always have an important place in breeding considerations. Breeding in flavor is, at best, a very long-term proposition, and no variety will meet the fancy of every palate.

The most immediate and flexible way to bring flavor to produce is through cooking techniques. Maybe the health department wants to offer three cheers for steamed vegetables, but I say let us offer two cheers for bacon... and by selling more flavorful produce, diets will be overall healthier than if we try to enforce an asceticism that turns people away from produce and toward less healthy alternatives. **pb**

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