

THE NATURAL SHOPPER

Going Natural

By Kassie Kemp, contributing editor

I am arguably and often very noticeably the health nut of the party. It's not that I am a strict vegetarian or an uptight low-fatter, but something about my presence makes every hostess apologize for her choice of food. I eat what I like to call a "whole food" diet and I order household and beauty products from companies that avoid chemicals. I do not consume caffeine or excessive amounts of meat, or foods made up to imitate what God has so adequately created. I try not to be so legalistic as to alienate others (especially my family), but I believe in what I do and I want others to know about it.

However, before I started looking into natural products, I ate a pretty standard South Texas diet: red meat 3 or 4 times a week, chicken or pork the other days, desserts and sweet snacks every day, and lots of fast, processed foods. Vegetables were a condiment that I added, in quantities that made me feel better about our diet, but which added no nutritional value to the meal (other than potatoes, which have an amazing ability to absorb butter and other fats). Fruits were O.K., but let's face it, I'd rather have the chocolate! The motivation to give up the chocolate (or most of it) and reach for the fruit has not been easy. I am still tempted and I still give in to that temptation on occasion.

I was reading in a cookbook the other day and discovered a statement in which the author claimed that no one would change his or her diet based on nutritional issues alone. That struck me as rather harsh and I don't know that I agree entirely with it, but what is so true about it is the idea that people do not want to give up taste. I've heard some of my relatives say that they would rather die a few days earlier than eat a healthy diet now. I really understand that philosophy: the carpe diem rendition of nutrition, I've had the same theory myself. But what I don't think people understand is how much the food they eat is affecting their bodies now. They assume that their lives will only be affected in the end, not any time soon.

What if I told you that 80% of cancer is caused by environmental factors (including diet), not genetics? We are under the mistaken assumption that we are victims of fate when it comes to this serious disease: my mother had breast cancer, so I will too. Very few people even try to minimize known environmental risks for breast cancer. And according to Dr. Samuel S. Epstein, professor of occupational and environmental medicine in the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois Medical Center, cancer is now attacking one in three Americans and killing one in four. How is the food we eat and the products we use connected with this statistic?

Well what would you think if I told you that our meat and dairy supply is pumped with hormones to increase profit for their industries? Or what if I told you that Europe doesn't want our meat and that there has been a ten-year debate between Europe, America and Canada over the importation of "contaminated beef" into that country? They base this meat ban on a link some prominent scientists make between these hormones and the hormone dependent cancers of the breast, prostate, testes, endometrium, and colon.

Do you eat lunchmeats, sausages, bacon, or ham? They all contain a preservative called sodium nitrate or sodium nitrite, which breaks down in the body and forms a carcinogen. Think about how often you eat these products or products that contain them, such as fast food.

Another suspect is pesticide residue. Although arguably better for you than a diet full of hormone-laden meats, fruits and vegetables treated with carcinogenic pesticides should also cause concern. Even washing produce with soap cannot remove fungicide waxes or pesticides that are throughout the fruit. And some of the pesticides used today have caused serious harm to farm workers who apply them in the fields. I am not saying that everyone who eats an apple will get cancer, but the possible cumulative effects these carcinogens have on our diets is a question that scientist debate and that we should at least consider.

Turning away from food for a moment, what if I told you that there could be formaldehyde in your shampoo? Or that the use of hair coloring products could account for up to 20% of all non-Hodgkin's lymphoma cases. Dr. Epstein in his book, *The Safe Shopper's Bible*, points out hundreds of non-food products that he believes to have carcinogenic (cancer causing) potential. Among these suspect items are household cleaners, hair products, make up, toothpaste, deodorant, and hair dyes.

Aside from cancer, there are many concerns for the natural shopper, including treating nutritional abnormalities (such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, anemia, high blood pressure, etc.), promoting overall wellness, and supporting and sustaining a healthy environment. My specific concern is for mothers who are trying to make sense of these issues and who are often looking for practical ways to incorporate a natural approach to living into their daily routines.

When I started looking into natural foods, for instance, I discovered that a friend was part of a natural food coop. Since I had seen a news report on peanut butter and its pesticide residues, I decided to try an organic version through my friend's coop. When that seemed to work for our family, I started becoming interested in other products. So began my endeavor to research the mainstream products that were in my kitchen and bathroom.

My goal in this column will be to discuss some of the claims of health food manufacturers and to provide a concise review of some of the research which will help you, the reader, make wiser purchasing choices. It is also my desire to provide suggestions for further reading and tips for finding and using natural products.

It has taken quite a bit to change my habits into the imperfect, but at least quite a bit better diet, which our family lives on now. Sometimes the difference in the before and after picture really hits me.

I was watching my three-and-a-half-year-old and my one-and-a-half-year-old eating a grapefruit half recently and arguing over whose turn it was to take a bite, giggling with glee when the fruit finally hit their mouths. I never thought that I would be playing referee over a grapefruit! Those moments are worth every bit of research and extra work I have put into shopping and food preparation.

And now we are back to the issue of taste. The very prevalent idea that if it's good for you it must taste like cardboard. The proof is in the pudding, so to speak, but I can say that almost all of my dinner guests have complimented the chef, astounded that the entire meal was good for them. They often want to "learn how to eat better." And come to think of it, that is just what we all need to do. Learn to eat food that is better for our health, but also learn to find ways to make healthy eating delicious.