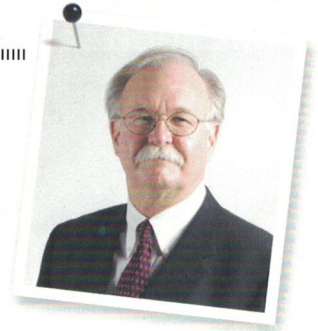


Ronald L. Doering



# Scary food

Food scaremongering by the popular media continues unabated. Last month I noted scary stories about the safety of farmed salmon, BPA in packaging, aspartame, water fluoridation, GMOs, pure fruit juice, and now even milk is positively evil. All of this brings to mind and lends weight to Mark Twain's observations that if you don't read about current events you are uninformed, and if you do, you are misinformed. This column being an exception, of course.

Misinformation comes in many forms. Newspapers no longer have trained science reporters with time to fully understand a complex issue, so most stories are filled with sensationalism and half truths. All manner of health food magazines and bloggers rant against any food that isn't "natural," extol uncritically the virtues of organic (whatever that means) and rail against GMOs, even though after trillions of meals and 20 years (now that's a long-term study) there is not a single documented case of someone getting even a little tummy ache. Television news either features 30 second sound bites necessarily oversimplifying complex issues and focusing on the scary bits or, more intent on creating the news than just reporting it, occasionally do "investigative journalism" that invariably demonizes big food companies.

Public sector unions shamelessly threaten in the press that unless more inspectors are hired our food won't be safe. Celebrity chefs and other "experts" (don't get me started on the Food Babe, Dr. Oz or Gwyneth Paltrow) pontificate

**INGREDIENTS:** AQUA (84%), **SUGARS (10%)** (FRUCTOSE (48%), GLUCOSE (40%), SUCROSE (2%)), FIBRE E460 (2.4%), **AMINO ACIDS (<1%)** (GLUTAMIC ACID (23%), ASPARTIC ACID (18%), LEUCINE (17%), ARGININE (8%), ALANINE (4%), VALINE (4%), GLYCINE (4%), PROLINE (4%), ISOLEUCINE (3%), SERINE (3%), THREONINE (3%), PHENYLALANINE (2%), LYSINE (2%), METHIONINE (2%), TYROSINE (1%), HISTIDINE (1%), CYSTINE (1%), TRYPTOPHAN (<1%)), **FATTY ACIDS (<1%)** (OMEGA-6 FATTY ACID: LINOLEIC ACID (30%), OMEGA-3 FATTY ACID: LINOLENIC ACID (19%), OLEIC ACID (18%), PALMITIC ACID (6%), STEARIC ACID (2%), PALMITOLEIC ACID (<1%)), ASH (<1%), PHYTOSTEROLS, OXALIC ACID, E300, E306 (TOCOPHEROL), **THIAMIN, COLOURS** (E163a, E163b, E163e, E163i, E160a) **FLAVOURS** (ETHYL ETHANOATE, 3-METHYL BUTYRALDEHYDE, 2-METHYL BUTYRALDEHYDE, PENTANAL, METHYL BUTYRATE, OCTENE, HEXANAL, DECANAL, 3-CARENE, LIMONENE, STYRENE, NONANE, ETHYL-3-METHYLBUTANOATE, NON-1-ENE, HEXAN-2-ONE, HYDROXYLINALOOL, LINALOOL, TERPINYL ACETATE, CARYOPHYLLENE, ALPHA-TERPINEOL, ALPHA-TERPINENE, 1,8-CINEOLE, CITRAL, BENZALDEHYDE), METHYL PARABEN, 1510, E300, E440, E421 and **FRESH AIR** (E941, E948, E290).

on the dangers of nearly every food that ordinary people eat. My aunt wonders if there are any safe foods left. Is it any wonder that we're producing a nation of orthorexics, people with an unhealthy obsession with eating healthy?

Perhaps the most insidious source of misinformation comes from the many food books by urban foodies like Michael Pollan. They universally condemn "chemicals" in our food and promote a nostalgic return to "natural" food produced using 19th century technology on small family farms, even though the evidence is that these foods are no safer, more nutritious or tastier. Widely quoted is Pollan's dictum to never eat food that has several chemicals in its ingredient list. No wonder that the poor consumer suffers from acute chemical paranoia.

Misinformation is easy to spread because, unfortunately, much of the science-based nutritional advice we've received over the last several decades has actually turned out to be wrong. Moreover, with the high degree of uncertainty and growing public distrust in nutrition science, high profile conflicts among food scientists over what to eat or not eat, and a low level of scientific literacy generally, it's easy to see why consumers are confused.

Misinformation about chemicals in our food has resulted in many consumers equating "chemicals" with man-made synthetic chemicals, oblivious to the fact that the number of chemicals in our food probably exceeds a million, vastly outnumbering the minuscule few that are man-made. The majority of these natural chemicals — perfectly acceptable in organic food — have never been subjected to any testing and are positively riddled with natural carcinogens. All of the hundreds of chemicals in a single cup of coffee are natural, and scientists estimate that 70 per cent of these will probably cause cancer in high doses in lab animal experiments. As cancer specialist Bruce Ames has said: "Of all the dietary pesticides people eat, 99.99 per cent are natural." Reading the popular press and social media, most consumers would hardly know that all major health organizations agree that traces of synthetic chemicals in our diet do not pose a significant health risk.

How can we ever combat all this misinformation? There are no easy answers, but for one thing, scientists need to get a lot better at communicating science in a way that can be understood by ordinary consumers. Here's an example of creative communication developed by chemistry teacher James Kennedy. Study the ingredients list at the top of this column. Note all the scary multi-syllable chemicals. According to Pollan, nobody should ever eat this food. Recognize it? It's an all-natural organic blueberry. ●

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