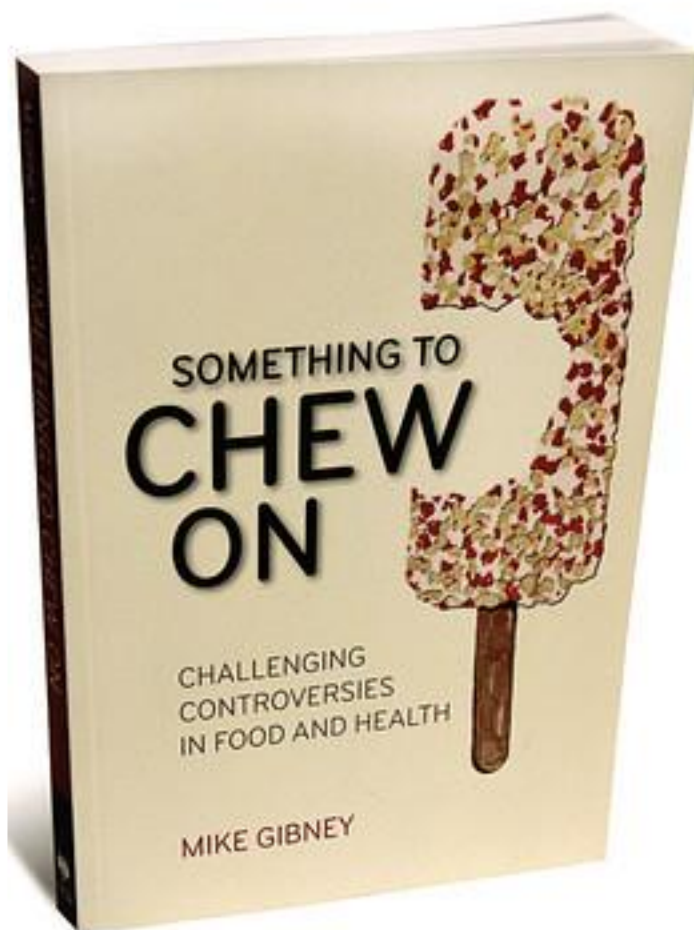
Not so long ago, I spoke to a chef who ministers to children attending some of the most elite and expensive schools in America. Why, I asked him, was his company's website larded with almost comical warnings about the lethality of eating genetically modified (GM) food? Did he actually believe this as scientific fact or was he catering to his clientele's spiritual fears? It was simply for the mothers, he said, candidly. They ate it up—or, rather, they had swallowed so many apocalyptic warnings about genetically modified food that he had no choice but to echo their terror. How could they entrust their children to him otherwise? The downside of such dogma, he explained, was cost. Many of the mothers wouldn't agree to their children eating anything less than 100% organic, even if organic food required flying in, as he put it, "apples from Cuba." Even among America's elite, not everyone could stomach the price of purity.

If ever the mothers of the 1% needed something of substance to digest, then it's "Something to Chew On," a grand tour of food-related sense and nonsense led by Mike Gibney, one of Ireland's leading scientists and a noted authority on food and nutrition.

With lucid precision and a leavening of wry comment, Mr. Gibney surveys the best of recent research and the claims being made about food, health and the environment. His approach throughout is one of scientifically informed skepticism. He notes, for instance, that "buying local seems attractive" and that leading chefs seem to favor it, but it is often "not feasible" unless we all want to go back to a time, long ago, when the caged menu of local food led to a poor diet. He writes that "the breadth of variety we have today requires food miles"—that is, the transport of food over a distance. Contrary to the claims of hyper-localists, food miles are "not a major factor in the overall CO2 economy." Indeed, if you examine all the variables—food quality, cost of storage, consumption habits, seasonal fluctuations—"food miles are far more complex than the simple models often used by activists."

Similarly, he shows that the "corporate component of the average diet"—the part blamed on McDonald's, MCD +0.06% Nestle NESN.VX -0.23% and other food giants—"is far less than is popularly believed." Retailers, sitting at the "interface" between consumer and producer, in fact wield great influence, he notes, negotiating terms, demanding labels, banning additives, setting standards. The "industrial section," he says, is portrayed as the dominant player in the human food chain, "but that is not really the case."

As Mr. Gibney surveys the vast landscape of genetics, it becomes obvious that our pandemic of obesity isn't simply the result of people being stupid about what they eat. Biological propensities play a major role, along with lifestyle choices. So even as we are beset with the cost of obesity, he argues, the problem of malnourishment—not getting the right kind of food—afflicts the lean and fat alike and ultimately costs our health-care systems just as much to deal with. It is the great hidden problem of aging in the developed world: Lower energy requirements, Mr. Gibney says, often lead to less eating, a tendency that "can be augmented by declining taste capacity." The combination can then lead to "even more muscle loss known as sarcopenia, a major cause of frailty, disability and loss of independence among the elderly."



Something to Chew On

By Mike Gibney

(University College Dublin Press, 177 pages, $38.95)

What becomes most clear of all in "Something to Chew On" is that most of us don't know what we are talking about when we talk about food and health. In the culture wars of the 1980s, impassioned arguments over deconstruction forced on participants a high entry fee. You had to know something about French theory to have a say. Unfortunately, the food wars merely require us to eat in order to become warrior-philosophers of the body politic. To adapt the famous line by the 18th-century French gastronome Brillat-Savarin, tell me what you eat and I won't just tell you what you are, I'll tell you off as well.

The problem—spelled out in a chapter called "How the Other Half Dies"—is that our first-world, finger-wagging food warfare can have terrible consequences, especially when it comes to genetically modified food. "Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Sudan," writes Mr. Gibney, "have all rejected food aid shipments on the grounds that they might contain GM grains." And why not, when European aid groups are funding anti-GM initiatives in those countries? Africans just want to be as safe as Europeans. But in this case, Africans risk literal blindness, from Vitamin A deficiency, by following Europe's metaphorical blindness over the benefits of GM crops. "As a citizen of Europe," Mr. Gibney says, "I feel utterly ashamed."

And there's a lot to be ashamed of. "So great is the level of confusion" over GM food, he writes, "that a staggering one in three European citizens agrees with the statement that 'Ordinary tomatoes don't have genes but genetically modified ones do.' "

Which isn't to say that blind panic over food is something new. Mr. Gibney recounts the plight of some followers of the Greek geometrician Pythagoras who, fleeing from persecution, were blocked by a field of fava beans. So fearful where they of being poisoned (to the susceptible, fava beans can induce a lethal form of anemia), they decided to take the long way around. "The hypotenuse would have been the wiser option," says Mr. Gibney. "They met their end."

The question is whether, in the face of similar decisions, we take the hypotenuse and allow others to do so. Are we going to rule GM crops that are resistant to drought off the table—beyond discussion—simply because the hypothetical risk is worse than actual drought? Or are we going to be scientifically reasonable? These are life-and-death decisions, and this is what makes "Something to Chew On" compulsive reading.

Mr. Butterworth is a contributor at Newsweek and editor at large for STATS.org.

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