Paradox of Plenty

A Social History of Eating in Modern America

Revised Edition

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fore their eyes and Americans shunned their own kitchens in favor of other defrosters. In 1960 Americans had spent twenty-six cents of every food dollar away from home; by 1981 thirty-eight cents of every dollar escaped the grocery trade. While restaurants were the major culprits, take-home outlets also posed an increasing threat. But supermarkets counterattacked by expanding their own offerings of fully prepared foods to take home. Delicatessen counters now commonly featured barbecued chickens, spare ribs, lasagne, and a variety of pasta and other salads, while salad bars sold large arrays of washed, chopped, and sliced vegetables and dressings. The food-processing industries rolled in behind them, developing new products that could be almost as easily microwaved at home as by teenagers in a restaurant. As a result, the variety of foods displayed in the supermarkets increased exponentially, as did the size of the stores themselves. The range of choices now available to the shopper made that which had seemed so impressive in the 1950s pale in comparison. At the same time, the choice of where to shop expanded, as chains of smaller markets such as 7-Eleven arose, specializing in prepared and convenience foods aimed at singles or families with working mothers.

The end result of all of this was an incredible extension of the food choices facing Americans. Although they still clung to certain “core” foods and traditional taste “markers,” Americans were accompanying them with an ever-increasing variety of “sauces” and eating them in ever less formal fashions. Family meals seemed on the wane, even where traditional family structures survived. Snacking, on the other hand, was becoming a continuous process, indulged in practically at all times in all places. Indeed, it was calculated that three-quarters of all Americans derived at least 20 percent of their energy needs from snacks. (This might explain the success of the song “Junk Food Junkie,” which climbed to the top of the pop music charts in 1976.) There were even predictions that among certain middle-class groups, particularly singles, “grazing”—snacking in different locales—would soon almost entirely replace formal meals. When this explosion of options regarding what, where, and when to eat was set against the recurring scares over food and health, the result verged on dietary chaos, at least for the middle and upper classes. Possibly the only thing that could have made matters even more confusing was a competing concern over weight loss, and this, of course, is exactly what was happening.

The Reagan family had hardly unpacked its bags in the White House when Nancy Reagan began choosing new china for her new home. The enormous cost—$209,508 for 220 gold-embossed place settings—seemed to set the pattern for the rest of the decade, as the Reagans helped make ostentatious wealth more fashionable than it had been since the 1920s. So did their inauguration, a sixteen-million-dollar, multi-venue extravaganza tarnished only somewhat when the building’s derelicts and bag ladies invaded the Union Station party and helped themselves to the lobster bisque, shrimp merlin, escargots, and veal laid out for the invited guests. An economic downturn in the early 1980s hardly affected the upper-income beneficiaries of the tax cuts Reagan pushed through soon after assuming office, and the long shadows of foreign challenges to Americans’ self-perception as the wealthiest people on earth could still be ignored. Newly rich financial wizards and media culture heroes took new pride in living “Life in the Fast Lane.” It was to be the last of the century’s ages of abundance: a time—like the 1920s—when American business leaders and their cheerleaders in the White House seemed to have found, in the “magic of the marketplace,” the keys to everlasting prosperity.

Nancy Reagan, surrounded by new Sun Belt wealth, presiding over glittering events in her fashionable size 4 outfits, seemed to epitomize the decade. Unlike her immediate predecessors as First Lady, who left the details to their social secretaries, she took a particular interest in the food chef Henry Haller prepared for these functions, asking him to make the platters fancier, the color combinations more striking, and the portions smaller. Her increasingly cadaverous appearance began to make “Babe” Paley’s famous aphorism “you can’t be too rich or too thin” look like a sick joke, but the remark seemed to neatly encapsulate the new elite’s aspirations. A lust for wealth displaced older ideas of public service in Washington, drove considerations of responsibility to clients, stockholders, and public from Wall Street boardrooms, and turned Ivory Tower college campuses into centers for glorifying greed. Indeed, there was no such thing as “too rich” in a culture that viewed wealth as the ultimate sign of achievement and elevated a way of getting it—“the deal”—into an art. Success was defined
Indeed, in the mid-1950s women cinched in their waists with tight belts to emphasize bosom and hips to a degree second only to those who aspired to "hourglass" figures during the belle époque. Zaftig actresses such as Jane Russell, Anita Ekberg, Marilyn Monroe, and Jayne Mansfield were able to achieve stardom practically on the basis of the size of their bosoms alone. It is easy to see why only 5 percent of the women polled by Gallup in June 1955 said they were on diets.

Yet for reasons that are still unclear, in the early 1960s the beauty and fashion pendulum began to swing back toward the thin ideal. A statistical analysis of the measurements of Playboy centerfolds and Miss America pageant contestants in the 1960s and 1970s has charted this, showing how both groups of women became considerably thinner over that period. The Playboy models also changed shape significantly, becoming much more "tubular," with smaller bosoms, larger waists, and smaller hips. The thinner trend was particularly remarkable, said the researchers, because it went in the opposite direction of the actual changes in young women's bodies reported by life insurers over that period: Their average weight actually increased. "It is worth noting," the study concluded, "that just over 5% of female life insurance holders between the ages of 20 and 29 are as thin as the average Miss America Pageant winner between 1970 and 1978." What was even more disturbing to the authors, who treated eating disorders in Toronto, was that "Playboy centerfolds and Miss America pageant contestants hardly represent the bony-thin body frame that is typically promoted by the fashion and advertising industries. It is obvious that the prevailing shape standards do not even remotely resemble the actual body shape of the average woman consumer." By the early 1980s, study after study and poll after poll showed that a large majority of American women had come to think they were too fat. Fully 76 percent of respondents in a 1983 Glamour magazine survey, for example, categorized themselves that way. Yet 45 percent of this group actually weighed less than the 1959 recommendations of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which advocated a degree of slenderness that was soon abandoned as unhealthy.

Yet where "the prevailing shape standards" came from is still not clear. Feminists often blamed the (male-dominated) media and fashion industries for creating another impossible hoop through which women were forced to jump. That the media abetted the weight-loss mania is indisputable. Sitcom heroines, television commercials, ads in the print media—all provide visual evidence for the growing obsession with slenderness, particularly after about 1968. A survey of six women's magazines counted 70 percent more articles on dieting in the years 1968 to 1979 than in the previous ten years. Studies showed that women had come to believe that slenderness was the most important aspect of physical attractiveness. An analysis of prime-time television showed that women with thin bodies were also associated with favorable personality traits.

Why did this message pour forth at that particular time? On one level it seems linked with the emergence of the baby boomers as a major engine
of the economy and culture. The media often apocryphalized them as the repositories of Truth and Beauty—particularly the latter—and their youthful standards of beauty came to dominate all others. Now, both young girls and their mothers aspired to the same youthful body type. As Fischler points out, this was unique in history. In most societies there are at least three stages of womanhood—a young, nubile one; a fecund one; and a mature, aging one—which women's appearance is expected to reflect. "In no civilization before our own," he says, "has the same ideal body and clothing type been imposed at these different ages and social roles."

But there was something else that was also unique to our times. Although young nubile women had generally been considered sexually attractive in the past, they were usually rounded in shape. Now, the desirable young look was an angular one, taut and wrinkle-free, the image of an immature, prepubescent girl. Noting that adult women who managed to achieve this ideal would stop menstruating, the Toronto eating disorder therapists remarked that "it is ironic that the current image of sexual attractiveness in women is a shape associated with both loss of reproductive functioning and sexual appetite." But perhaps there is no irony there, for the sexuality of this look posed no problem to many of the trend-setting men in the media and fashion industries. (Andy Warhol, the homosexual guru of "pop art," and his emaciated "star" Edie Sedgwick come to mind.) Of course this runs counter to some feminists' notion that demeaning fashions are imposed on women by lustful heterosexual males. Indeed, if anything, fashion seemed less concerned than ever before about catering to these instincts. As we have seen, the Playmate and Miss America body types—which approximated the conventional male ideal—were far fuller than what most women idealized. Most men seemed puzzled by, rather than attracted to, Twiggy, the fashion phenomenon of the late 1960s, who was 5'7" tall and weighed but ninety-one pounds. These sexual differences persisted into the mid-1980s, when studies continued to show that males' ideal female body image was considerably different than that of females.

This is not to ascribe the fashionable female image to some kind of gay conspiracy. Not only was there no conspiracy, but there were other important factors, aside from fashion, at play. As part of the era's turn toward the "natural," women rejected the layers of clothing and the stuff undergarments that had helped hide or support the fleshier parts of their bodies, exposing their real figures to unprecedented public examination. Miniskirts and minimalist clothing might even have reflected, as Roberta Seid suggests, the generation's extremism in other areas—particularly politics. But, as Seid also points out, perhaps the most important force underlying the compulsion to lose weight was the deep current of "fat-phobia" that had been steadily gaining strength in much of the industrialized world since at least the 1920s.

Historically and anthropologically, fat people have been regarded in contradictory ways: as either predatory gluttons, voraciously grabbing more than their fair share of food, or as benign gourmands enjoying one of life's great pleasures. As fears of food shortage and famine receded, so did the first—malign—view of fat people, although it still emerges from the collective unconscious occasionally, as in the negative feelings psychologists report people express when shown photos of fat people. But the second—benign—view also changed, particularly with the rise of dieting in the twentieth century. Increasingly, as we saw regarding the War on Hunger, being fat signified an inability to control one's impulses. Middle-class fat people, it was agreed, must be deeply unhappy. How else could they feel about having lost their self-control and become slaves to their cravings? One wonders if the students of the 1980s readily understood Shakespeare's Julius Caesar when he said, "Let me have men about me who are fat, sleazy-headed men who sleep o' nights." How could self-indulgent fat people enjoy the sound sleep of the guiltless? Conversely, why Caesar thought Cassius's "lean and hungry look" made him "dangerous" must also have been puzzling. They would think Cassius would be quite content to look like a rock star.

That males as well as females were affected would support the idea that much more than fashion or the media was involved. As we have seen, beginning at least as early as the 1910s, and particularly in the 1960s, an increasing number of nutritional experts blamed many of America's most serious health problems on obesity. Although they disagreed on many other scores, establishment nutritionists such as Frederick Stare and Jean Mayer were in solid agreement on this. In the 1970s more radical critics joined the antifat campaign, denouncing the corporate-dominated food industries for foisting fatty, oversweetened, nutritionally rapid food on unresisting Americans. It was "an establishment that wanted us passive, blissed out in front of televised sports, too impacted by beer and junk food to prevent the robbery of our health and country," said socially conscious New York Times sportswriter Robert Lipsyte. These ideas fit in well with the campaign against commercials for sweetened cereals, sweet snacks, and "junk foods" on children's TV, much of which was based on the (fallacious) idea that overeating in childhood boosted the number and size of fat cells and caused obesity in adulthood. "The total number of fat cells we carry into adult life is totally dependent upon eating habits established during childhood and early adolescence," said a typical critic. The fight against overweight also went along well with the larger turn toward the Negative Nutrition, for it emphasized getting overindulgent Americans to cut down and cut out. However, unlike other calls of the Negative Nutrition, fat-phobia itself threatened few powerful food interests. If anything, it opened new windows of commercial opportunity. Consequently, few experts were ready to challenge some of the questionable "facts" upon which it was based.

With no one lobbying for avoidobrix on Capitol Hill, there were no objections to the 1977 Senate Nutrition Committee's Dietary Goals calling it a national evil to be extirpated. Other government agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture and Health, soon joined the campaign. In 1985 a Consensus Development Panel of the National Institutes of Health declared thirty-two million Americans, about 28 percent of the adult popula-
tion, to be overweight and warned that the available evidence indicated this adversely affected health and longevity. Not only was it psychologically burdensome, they said, but it was clearly associated with hypertension, high-risk serum cholesterol, non-insulin-dependent diabetes, certain cancers, and other medical problems. The 1988 Surgeon General’s Report declared “overeating” to be a problem for most Americans. They were admonished to “achieve a desirable weight” by cutting consumption of foods high in calories, fats, and sugars, limiting alcohol intake, and exercising more.

“Every authority, every institution in our society,” wrote Seid in 1989, “urges us to fight our fat.”

While the crusade against overweight was, in itself, nothing new, the extent to which it affected males was. As we have seen, the dieting crazes of the 1930s were overwhelmingly female phenomena. For almost thirty years thereafter, most males continued to be blithely indifferent to losing weight. In 1955, 74 percent of them told Gallup they were satisfied with their weight or wanted to put on more poundage. A mere 3 percent were dieting at that moment, and only 17 percent said they had ever seriously tried to lose weight. The Metrecal and other diet fads of the early 1960s mainly involved females. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an increasing number of middle-class men began to work seriously at losing weight. By the mid-1970s dieting for weight loss had lost its mainly feminine connotation, and by the 1980s, particularly as it became intimately linked with exercise, to watch one’s weight was becoming a sign of prudence among middle- and upper-middle-class men. To lunch on poached fish and/or a salad and reach for a Diet Coke after a workout connoted a healthy concern for one’s well-being. Clever commercials featuring burly sports heroes who gloated menacingly in proper macho fashion before reaching for a “lite” beer even helped make calorie-reduced foods acceptable among working-class men. Not surprisingly, a 1986 study indicated that more than half of the seventy-eight million Americans using low-calorie foods had only begun doing so during the past five years and that the bulk of these recent converts were male.

Yet while conceptions of the ideal male body shape slimmer down, particularly among the middle and upper classes, it hardly approached the slimmest of that prevailing among women. One reason seems to be that, while there was certainly no shortage of modern-day Ponce de Leons, men did not face the same pressure to maintain their youthful looks as women. Men’s looks could still reflect their stage in life. Indeed, they were thought to get more “distinguished” with age. A few wrinkles on the face were regarded as denoting pleasing crappiness rather than, as with women, decrepitude. Also, while tautness of body was highly regarded, men are burdened with a smaller percentage of body fat in the first place. Nevertheless, there was more than enough cause for concern. Most middle-class men had sedentary occupations, and “love handles” or even “spare tires” had a tendency to show up in their midriffs by age thirty, a landmark most baby boomers had passed by the early 1980s. Studies now showed that, like their wives, lovers, and daughters, most middle- and upper-class men over thirty now regarded themselves as overweight. While they were ultimately not prepared to sacrifice as much as females to battle it (the proportion of females to male dieters remained about two to one), they were still affected by the new weight-control ethic. In this, they were part of an international trend. By the 1980s, says Fischler, “a large proportion of the population of the most developed countries dreamed of being thin, saw themselves as fat, and suffered from the contradiction.”

At first, the food industries reacted to rising fat phobia in the usual way, by changing the labels and advertising of old products to emphasize their noncaloric properties. But then commercial lightening struck, starting a spectacular pouring of newly formulated “lite” foods. Calorie-reduced foods had originally been aimed mainly at diabetics. The approval of the artificial sweetener cyclamate in the early 1950s had widened their scope and encouraged a migration from drugstores to supermarket shelves. Changing the signs over these sections from the off-putting “diabetic foods” to “dietetic foods” also encouraged sales, but subsequent gains were made mainly by soft drinks. By the mid-1970s, however, it was becoming apparent that—for reasons Adam Smith would have been hard-put to explain—consumers were willing to pay more for less; that is, they would shell out premium prices for “lo-cal” products with reduced food value. At first, large processors of well-established brand names turned to the time-honored method of product-line extensions. These were particularly profitable in the beverage industry, where the segment soon boomed after aspartame was approved for use in soft drinks in 1983. But introducing “lite” prepared foods remained a problem, for frozen prepared foods, their most obvious form, had developed an inferior TV-dinner image. Indeed, sales of frozen dinners and pot pies had been in steady decline since 1972.

All this changed in 1981 with the introduction of Stouffer’s Lean Cuisine. Stouffer’s had spent five years developing a line that would overcome the general perception that frozen dinners meant meager portions, poor quality, and little variety. Convinced, correctly, that it had finally done so, it then hired “Lean Teams,” consisting of a nutritionist and well-known athletes, to tour the country promoting its fourteen-day diet plan, “On the Way to Being Lean.” Within a year of its introduction it had almost single-handedly led sales of lo-cal items to jump from 7 to 17 percent of the frozen entree market. Heinz then weighed in with its Weight-Watcher’s line, and grocery freezer shelves were soon packed with premium-priced, tempting- looking entrees and dinners, emblazoned with the vital calories-per-serving information necessary to regulate dosage. As Prepared Foods noted the next year, Lean Cuisine’s success “spread far beyond the frozen food case. It demonstrated dramatically that today’s upscale consumers will spend a little more for food products in tune with their lifestyles.” A new age of “frozen food for the Jacuzzi generation,” not the “old TV types,” had dawned, said the Washington Post.

Ironically, among the main corporate beneficiaries of the diet craze were
snack food manufacturers, whose business had also been in the doldrums for much of the 1970s. In 1983 Prepared Foods noted that dessert consumption had been hard hit by the fact that one-third of the nation’s females and one-sixth of its males were dieting, but “snack foods are taking up much of the food treat slack.” Indeed, what seemed to be happening was that weight-conscious dieters were filling in the voids created by meal-skipping with more snacks. Housewives trying to lose weight were passing up breakfast and lunch, as well as cutting down on dinners, noted a food industry consultant, but they were making up for it with snacking. Like most other Americans, she said, they snacked “from morning to bedtime” and even after—an average of about twenty “food contacts” per day. A similar psychology allowed the diet fetish to coexist with the continuing boom in “gourmet” dining. The “gourmet” food industry did very well on consumers who made up for weekday deprivation by overindulging in “gourmet” and specialty foods on weekends; “shape up, pig out,” they called it.

The publishing industry was a minor beneficiary of fat-phobia. By 1984 there were three hundred diet books in print in the United States. They were fixtures on every best-seller list; five million copies of Dr. Irwin Stillman’s Quick Weight Loss alone had been sold. No daytime TV talk show was complete without an interview with a peripatetic diet-book author whose work had been excerpted and summarized in countless newspapers and magazines. Most of their regimens were up-to-date-sounding variations on age-old nostrums—low protein, high protein, low fat, high fat, low carbohydrate, high carbohydrate, fruitarian, vegetarian, grapefruit, and so on. Stillman’s popular diet, which allowed only protein-rich foods like meat, eggs, and cheese, could be traced back to the all-meat diets, such as the Salisbury Diet, which followed on the late-nineteenth-century discovery of proteins, as could the ill-fated Dr. Herman Tarnower’s low-carbohydrate, high-protein Scarsdale Diet. There were some new twists—Weight Watchers borrowed quasi-religious techniques from Alcoholics Anonymous, for example—but the main new departure was the emergence, in the mid-1980s, of exercise as a major weapon in the attack on body fat. The Jane Fonda Diet gave way to the Jane Fonda Workout. (Only then did Ms. Fonda confess that her weight-reduction efforts had also been accompanied by bouts of bulimia.)

When all was said and done, though, the millions of middle-class men and women who periodically dieted, jogged, and exercised seem to have had little impact on what was perceived to be the national problem with overweight. In 1989 the government’s most comprehensive health and nutrition monitoring survey concluded that in the past two decades there had been “no decline in the prevalence of overweight.” Indeed, one analysis of its statistics concluded that in that period the average young woman (age twenty-five to thirty-four) had even gotten fatter. What also stayed the same was who fought the hardest in the battle against weight. The higher the class, the greater the effort to reduce, so it seemed, particularly among women. College-educated young women weighed less than those of the same age whose education had stopped at high school. One study even showed that married women’s weight was inversely proportional to their husbands’ income. Curiously, though, black women weighed more than their white counterparts at all economic levels, opening another area for “nature versus nurture” speculation.

The studies also evidenced the continuing disparity between the nutrition and health of rich and poor. Indeed, the gaps between the extremes of wealth widened during the 1980s. While the richest fifth experienced significant improvements in living standards and the middle class more or less held its own, mainly by increasing reliance on two incomes, the bottom 15 percent sank downward. The deterioration of the living standards of the poor could be seen, as it had been during the Depression, in the proliferation of breadlines, soup kitchens, and food banks. It could also be measured, as it could not during the Depression, in statistics. These seem to indicate that by 1979 two government programs, food stamps and expanded medical and Social Security benefits for the aged, had substantially improved the lives of the poorest 20 percent of Americans. Indeed, even the Field Foundation, whose 1967 study of hunger had spurred the War on Hunger, acknowledged in 1979 that federal food programs had eliminated most of the gross malnutrition in America’s backward rural areas and urban slums. However, during the 1980s the ranks of the poor were swelled by an influx of single parents. The evaporation of decently-paid blue-collar jobs also put downward pressure on those on struggling to stay on the lower rungs of the employment ladder, forcing many into poorly paid part-time service jobs or onto the welfare rolls. In Pennsylvania skilled steelworkers formed the bulk of the clientele for the two hundred soup kitchens that sprang up during the decade. A very visible wave of homeless people took to the streets, evoking images of the darkest days of the Depression. The century-long decline in infant mortality rates—still linked, among the poor, to nutrition levels—slowed, and the United States sank to twenty-second in the world on that score. Black infant mortality rates returned to where they had been earlier in the century, double those of whites.

It now seemed that the antipoverty advocates who in 1969 had ignored Daniel Moynihan’s warnings and abandoned support for the guaranteed income plan to concentrate on food stamps and other targeted programs had probably made a grave error. When the political winds changed direction, targeted programs such as food stamps could be cut back or gutted much more easily than income supplement programs such as those that helped many of the aged climb from poverty. This is more or less what happened to the food programs in the 1980s. In the guise of targeting only those most desperately in need, the Reagan administration worked persistently to cut back eligibility for food stamps. Simultaneously, it expanded the previously discredited commodity distribution programs, for the old surplus-disposing reasons. Little did the antipoverty activists who struggled for further expansion of food benefits in the late 1970s realize that those years would
soon be regarded as a kind of golden era in the struggle against hunger and malnutrition.

But the health of the poor, whether crowded in inner-city ghettos or scattered in remote country hamlets, was hardly a concern of most Americans in the 1980s, particularly the upper-income people benefiting most from the apparent miracle of "Reaganomics." They and the middle class continued to be buffeted by the contradictions of affluence. On the one hand, a continuing swirl of high-status foods and eating places beckoned. On the other, the dieting and exercise manias sent stern signals to cease and resist. In France the nouvelle cuisine helped mute the clash. When food processors were allowed to introduce "light" products there later in the decade, the cuisine took on a decidedly nouvelle hue. The two terms—nouvelle and light—became interchangeable on grocery shelves. But real nouvelle cuisine, classical in its simplicity, was just too restrained for the upscale trend-setters of Reagan's America. Classicism gave way to baroque, and even rococo, as a new breed of "maverick chefs" used nouvelle cuisine as a springboard for ever more dizzying dives into novel combinations of exotic ingredients. Austrian-born Wolfgang Puck took California by storm with dishes such as ravioli stuffed with lobster mousse, pizza with smoked salmon and caviar, and oysters drenched in curry-flavored sauce, sautéed in butter, and placed on a purée of cucumbers and cream. Anne Greer vowed flush Dallasis with veal chops sauced with a papaya purée and surrounded by a "halo of dark cordon sauce," red-chili pasta tossed with spinach and goat cheese, and warm chicken, avocado, and papaya salad with a soy sauce and ginger dressing.

But while the infrastructure of ex-student workers and lawyers producing goat cheese in Vermont and organic baby vegetables and edible flowers in Sonoma County expanded healthily, the enormous system producing foods for the mass market was beginning to stumble here and there. Only slowly did the realization begin to dawn that, as in other fields, American food processors were no longer in the technological lead. In the 1950s and 1960s, processing industry journals had routinely hailed any American manufacturers' advances as "firsts" in the world. By the 1980s innovation in U.S. equipment-manufacturing (the object of 90 percent of food industry research and development is raising productivity) was stagnating, while European processors, spurred by the expanding Common Market and overseas sales, had leapfrogged the Americans. Yes, American chemists still had their triumphs: In 1982 Prepared Foods hailed the National Starch and Chemical Company for coming up with clampless stuffed clams and meatless meat raviolis and lauded Nabisco for cleverly using red-dyed dehydrated apples in its strawberry parfait. But increasingly, articles on companies using new processes routinely began "first time in the United States." Even in packaging, the field where America had always reigned supreme, the widespread use of new methods such as sous-vide and aseptic cartons allowed the Europeans to push ahead of the Americans in maintaining the quality of preserved foods.

A series of ever more spectacular debt-financed takeovers—R. J. Reynolds of Del Monte and then Heublein, Datt of Kraft, Beatrice of Esmark (Swift, Hunt-Wesson), Pillsbury of Green Giant, climaxed by the fall of venerable Standard Brands and Nabisco to R. J. Reynolds in a thirty-two-billion-dollar deal organized by junk bond specialists Kohlberg, Kravis, and Roberts—did not help. Inevitably, as in other industries plundered by the corporate raiders, executives became fixated on next quarter's bottom line at the expense of long-term planning and research and development, putting even more distance between the American food megacorporates and the surging Europeans. Significantly, it was not their research, development, or even production facilities that made the food giants attractive takeover targets. It was their brand names—Del Monte, Jell-O, Ritz—embazoned at enormous cost over many years in consumers' minds as symbols of quality and confidence. The number of brands that are leaders in their markets today and were also the top brands in 1923 is striking testimony to the enduring value of these names: Campbell's soups, Swift's bacon, Nabisco crackers and cookies, Kellogg's cereals, Del Monte canned fruit, Crisco shortening, Lipton tea, Coca-Cola soft drinks, Wrigley chewing gum, Hershey chocolate, and Life Savers mints. Thus, when Swiss-based Nestlé's acquired Carnation for eight billion dollars in 1984—until then the largest non-oil-and-gas deal in history—Carnation's unimpressive R and D program was hardly a consideration. As in the other takeovers, its brand names were the lure. Asked about the benefits they were experiencing from the takeover, Carnation executives sounded like managers in Third World outposts as they hailed Nestlé's longer-term outlook and impressive research and development effort, most of which was done at its laboratories in Vevey, Switzerland.

Concentration also continued to be the name of the game in the chain restaurant business. By the mid-1980s it had become, in the words of an industry magazine, "top heavy." In 1987 the ten largest chains accounted for 57 percent of the top one hundred's sales volume, and the top twenty-five pulled in over 75 percent. Those below were by no means mom-and-pop operations. Orange Julius, with 580 outlets and eighty million dollars in sales, was number ninety-eight. As the industry matured, established brand names also proved invaluable. It cost half as much in advertising money to sell a McDonald's hamburger as one from Burger King.

Yet foreigners muscled into even this quintessentially American sphere, albeit with mixed results. Pillsbury and its fractious Burger King subsidiary were likely set back by being swallowed by Britain's Grand Metropolitan, a debt-laden brewery-and-pub-based conglomerate that had little to offer in terms of capital, technology, or organization. The British conglomerate Imperial Tobacco could not turn Howard Johnson's around, although its Canadian subsidiary, Imasco, had more luck with Hardee's. Perhaps the most telling sign of the passing of American supremacy came after the great age of mergers was over. Among the debt-ridden companies unable to raise capital in the recession of the early 1990s was Restaurant Associates, an
innovative leader that had helped raise the level of American dining a notch or two in the 1960s with restaurants such as the Four Seasons in New York City. In 1991 it too slipped into foreign ownership, leaving people to ponder the significance of Mamma Leone’s, that boisterous New York Italian restaurant, now being Japanese-owned.

Even before the recession that pushed Restaurant Associates into foreign hands began to batter the nation, the pendulum was already swinging back from its 1980s’ extremes. As the Reagans glided through the final series of glittering events before leaving the White House in January 1989, the economic house of cards they had helped construct was falling apart. Huge budget deficits handcuffed the federal government, starting a domino effect on state and local governments facing cutbacks in Washington aid. Within two years of the Reagans’ return to California, despite the cutbacks in eligibility, one in ten Americans was poor enough to qualify for and receive food stamps, whose cost now consumed half of the Department of Agriculture’s entire budget. In November 1991 other Hollywood stars, in a eerie echo of the five-cent meals served at the Waldorf-Astoria and other posh hotels in December 1930, prepared to attend the Hollywood Hunger Banquet. There, the likes of Dustin Hoffman and Cybill Shepherd were expected to draw lots to see whether they would be seated among the small group served an elegant three-course meal or at wooden tables with a larger group eating rice and beans with tortillas, or with the largest group of celebrities, on the floor, to eat rice and water with their hands.

The collapse of the junk bond market and the multibillion-dollar savings and loan scandals brought many of the entrepreneurial culture heroes of the Reagan years into disrepute. As in the 1930s, esse cultus filled the air as the nation bemoaned the previous decade’s profligacy, cursed its misplaced faith in Wall Street, and sought to return to the traditional virtues—the comforts of home, family, and “the simple life.” Executives at Kraftco noticed a steady rise in sales of Kraft Macaroni Dinner: a sure sign of recession and the search for economical home-style food, they said. Americans had “tired of trendiness and materialism,” said Time in April 1991, and were “rediscovering the joys of home life, basic values and things that last.”

Restaurants were among the first to reflect this, for the reaction against the Reaganesque excesses was also reinforced by the pinch on discretionary spending. Suddenly, as in the 1930s, home cooking—now called “comfort food”—became the name of the game. Expensive French restaurants, facing sheets of empty white-napped tables, scrambled to downsize and downprice their menus by serving “bistro food”; sophisticated “Northern Italian” restaurants replaced their tiny portions of angel’s hair pasta with hearty platters of rigatoni and baked ziti, installed brick ovens, and became rustic-looking trattorias. Robust “Mediterranean” food rose in fashion, while “California cuisine” was proclaimed a dead duck, or at least a dying swan. “California cuisine has stopped,” said Joachim Splichal, chef and co-owner of Patina in Los Angeles. “I’m moving away from the salad approach to cooking.” “I don’t even know what California cuisine is,” said Michel Richard, chef and owner of the Citrus restaurant in the same city. “Maybe it’s a lot of uncooked vegetables. I don’t like that... I think people are tired of grilled food too.” Instead of exotic salads and minuscule portions of artfully decorated grilled foods, they served filling dishes such as roast pork, mashed potatoes, and puréed lentils and beans.

As in the 1930s, there was also a revival of middle-class interest in home cooking—or, at least, eating at home. Advancing age, family obligations, and slower income growth were transforming the high-flying “yuppies” of the 1980s into stay-at-home, self-proclaimed “couch potatoes.” “After years of takeout,” said the New York Times in September 1989, “many are returning home.” There they confronted their ignorance of even the rudiments of home cooking. Publishers therefore rushed out a wave of basic “cookbooks for the 90s” such as Julia Child’s The Way to Cook. These were profusely illustrated to meet the needs of a generation who responded better to visual than literary cues, with recipes that were spicier than the earlier standards and paid due respect to considerations of health.

At the other end of the gastronomic pole, the microwave revolution was eating into patronage at fast food restaurants. One reason was speed. “Fast food can no longer live up to its name,” said one food industry consultant. “There are never any lines at home. With the microwave you just reach into your freezer and pop it into the oven and zap! It’s done.”

The increasing variety of take-home food also hurt, although some of it was from fast food outlets. By 1987 fully seventy-one million American households—eight out of ten—regularly purchased take-out foods to be consumed at home, spending 15 percent of the national food dollar on these pizzas, chickens, and submarine sandwiches. When Gallup asked a sampling of people eating at home in September 1989 what they were eating, almost half were sitting down to frozen, packaged, or take-out meals. Partly as a consequence, a glumy pall settled over the fast food restaurant industry; domestic expansion slowed to a crawl, and chains resorted to vicious price-cutting.

There were even signs that the weight pendulum was beginning to swing back. The apparent epidemic of eating disorders among middle-class girls prompted criticism of impossibly thin ideals. Psychotherapists and others began to turn out books—such as Don’t Diet—questioning the efficacy and desirability of dieting. For the first time in almost two decades diet books were not regulars on best-seller lists. Fat people took a leaf from the pages of other denigrated groups and organized pressure groups to fight invidious stereotypes of them. They added their bit to the mania for “political correctness” by attacking “lookism” and warned against using language that demeaned them. The importance of heredity in weight gain and loss finally came to be recognized—that fatter people seem to inherit the ability to burn calories more efficiently than thinner ones—offering hope that individuals would not have to take moral responsibility for their excess poundage. Serious questions were also raised about how detrimental excess weight
really was to health. As with cholesterol, it now began to appear that only a small proportion of the population was at risk from overweight. Straying from the average or recommended weight for one's height and bone structure seemed to have deleterious effects mainly for those at the extremes of the charts, the most overweight and the most underweight. Indeed, by the end of the decade some experts were acknowledging that to be 10 to 15 percent over the recommended weights was not only not unhealthful, it might even be health-promoting—an echo of age-old notions of the healthfulness of what the French call eunouhomme, a pleasing stoutness.72

Women's fashion seemed to change in tandem, as curves began to creep back into the women's magazines and bosoms became noticeable on couturiers' runways. The exercise and fitness boom had helped modify the completely bony look of the early 1980s with a new admiration for musculature. Although still taut and wrinkle-free, this in turn began to give way to a grudging respect for curves. Cosmetic surgeons, whose liposuction and breast reduction techniques had presented a popular alternative to painful hours in the gym and on the jogging path, began to do more breast amplifications. From 1985 to 1991, the weight of women featured in Playboy centerfolds rose by one pound per year. The cover of the June 1991 Vogue magazine pictured a model who would almost certainly have been considered too buxom for it five years earlier—in a pose that clearly revealed this.73 Men's fashion seemed to be moving in the same direction, as reports that a "fuller shape" would soon be fashionable emerged from fashion centers in early 1991.74

Yet the pendulum hardly threatened to swing back even to where it was in the 1950s. If considerations of fashion were the only ones, then the possibilities would be practically infinite: There could be a revival of the 1980s' body ideals or even those of the Rubensian era of the early seventeenth century. But the other factors that fed this century's fat-phobia seemed to brake the swing. Though modified, the ideals that obesity is unhealthy and that exercise is good are too ingrained to simply go away, and they are still underpinned by the compulsion of a society of food abundance to regulate eating by touting on signs of overindulgence in it. Santa Claus may remain corpulent, but unless Doomsday scenarios of worldwide famine come to pass, future generations of children may well wonder why he is so jolly. For women, the decline of the matronly look would also seem to be related to the steady expansion of their role in workplaces outside of the home—the change from a society in which woman is regarded primarily as reproducer to one in which she is also a producer.75

Similarly, it was likely that the American diet would continue to reflect the growing impact of foreign cuisines and tastes, defanged and domesticated though they might be. The nature of the food industries and their market seemed to ensure this. During the 1980s the seventy-six million Americans in the baby boom generation continued to age and—in marketing jargon—segment. That is, they subdivided into singles, single-parent families, two-income families, and traditional one-income families, with differing responses to new products and sales pitches. The elderly were emerging as a distinctive—and important—market, with their own dietary agenda.76 The young formed other lucrative segments. Although labeled the "baby bust" generation because they were relatively small in number, they still had an enormous amount of disposable income, particularly as part-time employment (much of it in food retailing) became more common. As a result, said a food processors' journal, the days when food companies "treated consumers as a homogeneous mass with many mutual needs and wants" were over. The old "crossover marketing techniques" could no longer carry new products past most consumer thresholds. "We are in an age of multidimensional marketing: a division of food shoppers into various segments and sub-segments." The mass market had become micro, said the head of Campbell's.

This opened the door wider for ethnic foods, for, while most ethnic foods and tastes would fall flat in the mass market, a goodly number could do well among certain segments of the market, particularly the more upscale ones. Ethnicity thus became one of a battery of pitches, including health, loco, convenience, freshness, status, and value, to be mixed and matched in attempts to tap into specific segments. Campbell's combined ethnic, convenient, and loco with a bit of status in its upscale L'Orient line of frozen dinners. Others put items from different cuisines in the same dinner—cannelloni with mornay sauce, Salisbury steak with Italian tomato sauce. Still others tried pushing the ethnic frontier further than ever. The Silverbird Company of New York City even came out with a line of native American foods—Navajo Fry Bread, Buffalo Burgers, Blue Corn Pudding, and Rabbit Stew.77 Fifteen or twenty years earlier the idea of carving out a chunk of the market for this kind of food would have seemed ridiculous, but then so would the thought that Good Housekeeping would include an Ethiopian restaurant on its list of the nation's one hundred best, which it did in 1988, or that by 1990 Birmingham, Alabama, would count over sixty Chinese restaurants.78

Nor did the pendulum seem to be swinging back against food and health scares. Every available statistic chronicled the effects of cholesterol-phobia.79 Americans had been replacing whole milk products with low-fat dairy ones since the early 1960s and had been cutting back on butter and eggs and increasing their intake of margarine and vegetable oils since the late 1960s. Per capita consumption of beef had continued to rise until 1975—mainly because of the rise of fast food hamburger chains and the popularity of barbecue— but then began to plummet. Men between the ages of nineteen and fifty, those deemed most at risk from high cholesterol, were responsible for much of this decline, reducing their intake by about 35 percent. They also cut back on whole milk and eggs by about one-quarter while boosting their intake of low-fat milk and fish by 50 percent. Women of the same age reacted even more negatively to beef, cutting consumption by almost half, and also halved the amount of eggs they ate. Hamburger-based fast food chains scrambled to expand the available alter-
natives, but they still felt the pinch. In 1991, when McDonald’s shocked Wall Street by turning in particularly mediocre results, analysts ascribed the grim results in part to the qualms of aging baby boomers about eating beef.88

A rather bizarre offshoot of the turn against beef was a radically altered image for bovines. Previously, cows had been regarded as docile, pleasant animals, peacefully grazing, lowing, and sleeping until called to genially do their duty to their human masters. For years Borden’s had the happy Guernsey “Elzie” on its labels, and Carnation boasted that its products came from “contented cows.” Now, when the health-conscious looked at bovines they saw hundreds of pounds of life-threatening cholesterol production. Francis Lappé and the radicals of the early 1970s had already shown how ecologically wasteful they were, consuming much more protein than they produced. Now, the destruction of the Brazilian rain forest to make room for cattle ranches was linked directly to the American demand for fast food hamburgers, as was the displacement of farmers by ranchers in other parts of the Third World. As if that were not enough, environmentalists also charged that their relentless burping, flatulence, and droppings produced enormous amounts of methane gas, which depleted the ozone layer and was a major contributor to the “greenhouse effect.” The very people struggling to save dolphins, horned owls, and other endangered species now seemed intent on driving cattle into extinction.

Of course, food companies went through the usual orgy of reformulation, repackaging, and product-line extension to try to catch the cholesterolophic winds. Enterprising book publishers supplemented earlier Negative Nutrition cookbooks such as *The Don’t Eat Your Heart Out Cookbook*, *The Long Life Cookbook*, and *The American Cancer Society Cookbook* with titles such as *The Count Out Cholesterol Cook Book*, *Cholesterol-Control Cookbook*, and *Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease.*81 But one of the more unlikely groups that sought to profit from it was the American Heart Association—the organization that, it will be remembered, was one of the first to begin warning of its dangers in the early 1960s. Someone—perhaps one of the old-timers who remembered the 1930s AMA seal of approval or the World War II WFA symbol—persuaded it to organize a system whereby, in return for a fee, it would allow foods deemed healthy for the heart to display a special seal.82 But the food industry was not nearly as enthusiastic over this scheme as it had been over its predecessors. The food conglomerates were now so humongous that, while they all had divisions that might benefit from this, they also had ones that would look bad. Moreover, the FDA did not take kindly to the plan, seeing in it the possibility of opening a Pandora’s box it had originally created to close, that of misleading health claims for food.83 The petulant AHA was soon forced to withdraw the proposal.

But the cholesterol problem turned out to be much more complex than originally thought. The public were now told that three kinds of fatty acids affected it—one good, one bad, and one of uncertain effect. People who had followed expert advice and dutifully substituted margarine for butter now learned that much of the margarine was made of hydrogenated oils containing a kind of fat—transmonounsaturated fatty acids—that actually increased the risk of coronary heart disease.84 Corn and most other vegetable oils, the darlings of the 1960s’ cholesterol scare, also sank in experts’ estimates, replaced on the altar by olive oil, which was now said to reduce cholesterol levels, but only if cold-pressed. Meanwhile, oat bran came and went as a miracle cholesterol reducer, but rice bran and rice oil, which most people did not even know existed, seemed poised to take over the limelight. Contradictions abounded. Wine labels were made to carry health warnings, yet studies showed that drinking it likely raises the level of “good,” high-density lipids in the bloodstream.85

And on it seemed to go. Some studies indicated that increasing the intake of cholesterol itself had no effect on blood cholesterol levels. On the other hand, broiling and grilling meats, highly recommended by every expert concerned with weight loss and cholesterol, were now said to create carcinogenic nitrosamines. Only poaching seemed safe—hardly good news for steak lovers. Government agencies abandoned the old Basic Four. The surgeon general and even the USDA now emphasized getting the right percentage of energy from fats, warning that only a certain percentage of these fats could be bad-for-you fats. Nevertheless, experts attacked their recommendation that only 30 percent of calories be derived from fats as at least 50 percent too high; it should be 20 percent or lower, they said.86 A group called the Physicians’ Committee for Responsible Medicine called on them to endorse a new meatless Basic Four, a demand that aroused suspicion that perhaps the founding director’s animal rights agenda shaped its views on human health.87 Meanwhile, in April 1991 the USDA had timidly introduced a replacement for the famous pie chart illustrating the Basic Four. It was a pyramid of different categories of food, emphasizing grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables, intended to make its 1980 “Dietary Guidelines” easier to learn. When it quickly withdrew them, apparently in response to farm and food industry pressure, critics again charged—as they had since the 1930s—that it “placed agribusiness first, public health second.”88

When combined with the continuing choruses imploring Americans to lose weight and the changing drumbeats of status-makers—all amplified by misleading food advertising campaigns—the result seemed to be Fischler’s “dietary cacophony” played with the volume turned up as high as it could go. Perhaps it will end in the paralysis of “gastro-anomaly”—a hypothetical condition in which, bombarded by nutritional and culinary messages from all sides, people lose all sense of dietary norms and rules.89 But that is an extreme scenario. The fact is that, as Fischler says, “homovores” cannot live without food rules, norms, and restrictions. The cacophony may well produce a degree of deafness in the general public, manifested in a certain wariness about the daily pronouncements of experts on food and nutrition. (One hesitates to use the term “grain of salt.”) After all, for over one hundred years nutrition experts have been telling Americans to subordinate taste to
concerns about the economy and healthfulness of food. Yet while it may not be as important a consideration as it used to be, taste still plays an major role in their food choices. Moreover, despite the toll in flavor and variety taken by the industrialization of food, in their restaurants and markets Americans still have access to an unprecedented array of high-quality, tasty food. Indeed, the nation now stands—as it never did before—on an equal plane with Europe’s finest in terms of the opportunities for good eating, no matter how defined.

There remained another ray of hope. A common thread linked most of the scares: the idea that it was necessary and possible to have a national nutrition policy. This aspiration stretched back to the first food hopes for the New Nutrition in the 1890s, when nutritionists thought food reform would head off social upheaval. It was nurtured by the World War I conservation effort, stimulated by the malnutrition concerns of the Great Depression, and underlay the National Nutrition Conference of June 1941, which aspired to codify the Newer Nutrition. From there sprang the half-baked Recommended Daily Allowances—which, as we have seen, inflated the recommended nutrient intakes for the majority in order to accommodate the presumed needs of a minority—and the official Basic Four—“balanced diet” line, which was based on the assumption that everyone should eat plenty of all kinds of foods. The Negative Nutrition, which looked askance at many of the most highly recommended of these foods, represented a value-free in terms of approach but was nevertheless grounded in the same futile search for the Grail of national nutrition rules. Salt and sugar, as we have seen, while perhaps harmful to a small minority, were condemned out of hand for all. In 1988 the surgeon general persisted in recommending a drastic reduction in fat intake for the large majority of Americans in the face of evidence—since reinforced—that it would benefit only a minority. Indeed, in June 1991 a study concluded that if every American heeded the advice to cut fat intake to 30 percent of total calories, the benefits would be so limited that the average life span would increase by at most several months.

A later study estimated the gain at only several minutes.

The same seems to apply, as we have seen, to the calls for nationwide weight loss. Indeed, an analysis of the Framingham study statistics indicated that dieting might even be harmful to health. Men who dieted and then regained the weight they lost had much higher (from 25 to 100 percent) rates of death from heart disease than those who did not. Given the usual 95 percent recidivism rate in dieting, this would mean that, if followed in the usual zealous but futile manner, the admonitions that the nation as a whole lose weight might lead to much more ill health than they might prevent.

There may be grounds for optimism, however, in the increasing use of the phrase “for those at risk.” Slowly, it seems, the experts are beginning to acknowledge that the relationship between nutrition and health may be modified by so many other factors—individual biological makeup in particular—that few rules are universally applicable. Hopefully, this will lead

both to a rethinking of the role of government in telling people what to eat and—more important, for they are still the main source of nutritional information—more restrictions on food vendors’ ability to alarm and deceive the public by distorting the health benefits of their products. The “truth-in-labeling” law passed in 1991, which seeks, as David Kessler, the new head of the FDA put it, to shift the industry’s creative efforts from the marketers’ “word processor to the laboratory,” would seem to be a healthy step in this direction, although past experience must temper optimism in this regard. Nevertheless, modified ideas about what constitutes a healthy diet may take hold, allowing Americans to—in a variation of the old saw—have their good food and eat it too. This would certainly represent a giant step toward resolving the paradox of a people surrounded by abundance who are unable to enjoy it. But then again, these are difficult times for optimists.
Epilogue

Americans like to think that death is optional.
Anonymous Englishman, 2001

When the first edition of this book was published about ten years ago I was often asked, "Exactly what is the 'Paradox of Plenty'?" It was a reasonable question. After all, from the outset, with its description of breadlines in the land of plenty, the story I have told here is full of paradoxes. My answer usually involved the last of these paradoxes: that many of the people who have by-and-large solved the most basic of humanity's problems, that of ensuring an abundant food supply, seem to be unable, because of their fears and anxieties, to derive much pleasure from this. Yet, as the book also shows, that answer had to be supplemented with other kinds of paradoxes, such as that class differences continue to divide a people living in what most of them regard as a relatively classless society.

Of course, one could say that anxiety about food is something that transcends class and culture, that it is an integral part of the human condition and is the product of what Claude Fischler has called the "hominiere's dilemma." Unlike, say, koala bears, who live solely on eucalyptus leaves and cannot move from a small part of Australia, our ability to eat anything has enabled us to flourish in a wide variety of ecosystems. The dilemma is that this means we must always worry about the potentially harmful effects of the many different things we ingest. Yet a recent cross-cultural study of attitudes toward food and health that Fischler himself helped conduct has indicated that, even for humans, Americans seem unduly prone to such anxieties. Of all the people surveyed in seven nations, western and eastern, Americans associated food most with health and least with pleasure. For example, in word-association tests, the French, given the word "chocolate cake," tended to say "celebration." Most Americans responded with "guilt." For "heavy cream," the French said "whipped," while the Americans said "unhealthy." "There is a sense among many Americans," said Paul Rozin, one of the study's authors, "that food is as much a poison as it is a nutrient, and that eating is almost as dangerous as not eating." Although this study does not break down attitudes in terms of class, I think the previous chapters of this book make clear that these kinds of concerns affect mainly middle- and upper-class Americans.

A number of factors seem to have reinforced this generalized anxiety in the past ten years. A major one has been the persistence of lipophobia—fear of fatty foods. For much of the 1990s health authorities continued to echo the dire warnings of the government's 1977 Dietary Goals for Americans, which was largely influenced by a small band of anti-meat crusaders riding on some weakly grounded assumptions. In the early 1990s, critics lambasted the National Research Council's 1989 guidelines as weak-kneed because they told Americans that they could lower their risk of contracting heart disease and cancer by reducing the percentage of calories in their diets derived from fat to 30 percent, that is, by an average of about 20 percent. The lipophobes charged that the council's panel feared taking on the food industries and did not wish to "inconvenience" people by telling them the truth: they had to cut their fat intake much more and stop eating foods they liked. In the years that followed, there was a general consensus that the critics were right, that the recommended maximum should be 20 percent, and that the healthiest diets, although impossible for almost all Americans, were much lower in fat than that.

But, like practically all of the judgments regarding food and nutrition we have dealt with in these two volumes, the lipophobic message kept on changing. For example, well into the 1990s such highly respected bodies as the National Academy of Sciences repeatedly asserted that dietary fat caused cancer. In 1997, however, the academy admitted that there was no "convincing" or even "probable" reason to believe that this was true. Views on the harmfulness of the fats themselves were also drastically revised. As we have seen, since the 1950s fats had been judged on the basis of whether they raised or lowered blood cholesterol levels: saturated fats were "bad" because they raised cholesterol levels, polyunsaturated ones were "good" because they lowered them, and monounsaturated fats, which did neither, were "neutral." In the late 1970s, distinctions were made between "bad" cholesterol, that is, low-density lipoproteins (LDLs), which contributed to heart disease, and "good" cholesterol, in the form of high-density lipoproteins (HDLs), which helped prevent it. (The news that margarine, whose producers had taken the lead in promoting cholesertohobia, actually contained as much of this "bad" fatty acid as its erstwhile competitor, butter, was disorienting, to say the least.) However, then came the news that monounsaturated fats were not at all "neutral." Indeed, they seemed to be the best of all, for they raised "good" HDL levels and lowered "bad" LDL levels.

It was somewhat difficult for Americans who had been subjected to years of lipophobia to accept that, in the words of a 1999 New York Times headline, "Fat Can Be a Friend." However, as usual, those who stood to profit by it were more than willing to help spread the good news. Olive oil producers, whose product was particularly rich in one of the healthiest of the monounsaturated fats, poured millions of dollars into spreading the message among journalists and home economists. Since most Americans were decidedly unenthustiastic about the taste of olive oil, producers developed a special "light" (that is, tasteless) olive oil for the American market and publicized the "Mediterranean Diet," which used meat and fish sparingly and called for olive oil to be used liberally in dishes composed mainly of grains, legumes,
beans, and vegetables. Lipophobia also received a blow in November, 1991, when Morley Safer kicked off a segment of the top-rated television newsmagazine show “60 Minutes” by asking why the French, who indulged themselves in such high-cholesterol goodies as cheese and foie gras, had heart disease rates that were almost half of those of Americans, whose diets were much lower in cholesterol. The answer, he said, as he raised a glass of red wine, “may lie in this inviting glass.” There began ten years of controversy over this so-called French Paradox, which eventually saw the health authorities grudgingly allow wine producers to spread the word that Americans might avoid heart disease by raising their consumption of this enjoyable product to the much higher levels of the French.

Yet generalized lipophobia showed little sign of abating. A break seemed to occur in the late 1990s, when some of the authorities, recognizing the apparently healthy properties of fats such as the monounsaturated ones and omega-3s, began raising the limits on total fat to 35 and even 40 percent. Nevertheless, in May, 2001, the National Institutes of Health muddied the waters even further. It “declared war” specifically on cholesterol as the cause of an unnecessarily large number of heart attacks and called for it to be treated aggressively. It expanded the category of those at highest risk for heart attacks to include many people who had never had heart attacks, and said that they should be treated just like those who had already had heart attacks: they should be put immediately on LDL-lowering drugs. Yet it could not abandon the historic commitment to lipophobic dieting. It also recommended a “therapeutic” diet that allowed as much as 35 percent of calories from fats but reduced the amount of calories that could come from saturated fats to less than 7 percent—something extremely difficult for most Americans to achieve. Doctors were to recommend this diet to practically everybody whose blood cholesterol was at all elevated, whether or not they were in the high-risk categories. If carried out, this would mean increasing the number of Americans on both drug therapy and low-fat diets from 13 million to 36 million, and raising the total number of people on the special low-cholesterol diets to 52 million—a staggering proportion of the adult population.

The most significant thing, though, is that one of the cardiologists urging the adoption of the new guidelines admitted that the reason for recommending immediate drug therapy was that when heart attack victims were initially put on low-cholesterol diets, “in the vast majority of cases their cholesterol would not change.... This has been documented again and again.” It remained difficult for the layman, at least, to see how even highly motivated heart attack victims could not reduce their LDL levels through diet, the rest of the population would benefit from fighting a losing battle on this score, especially since the report said drugs had minimal side effects and were very efficacious in this regard. Once again, it seemed, health experts were having difficulty abandoning the century-long search for the grain of one-size-fits-all recommendations for national dietary change.

Exterior body fat also became a greater source of anxiety in the 1990s, and here again class was deeply involved. For the middle and upper classes, ridiculously low-weight standards for attractiveness persisted, especially among women, as did concern over eating disorders. However, these were now joined by warnings that an “epidemic” of obesity threatened the lives of millions of Americans. In 1999, the director of nutrition at the Centers for Disease Control said, “This is an epidemic in the U.S. the likes of which we have not had before in chronic disease.” Other experts warned that by the year 2020 the epidemic will have cost the public health budget hundreds of billions of dollars, “making HIV look, economically, like a bad case of the flu.” In October, 2000, the American Heart Association, which until then had devoted itself mainly to stirring up lipophobia, began recommending weight-loss diets, on the grounds that overeating was the leading cause of heart attacks. People giving up fatty foods had turned to fattening sweet ones, it said, “The low-fat message for many people is distorted,” said a spokesman, “so they are selecting foods with high junk calories.”

The official justification for calling obesity an epidemic was a study by the Centers for Disease Control saying that the proportion of Americans who were obese increased from 12 percent of the population in 1991 to 17.9 percent in 1998. “Rarely,” said the researchers, “do chronic conditions such as obesity spread with the speed and dispersion characteristic of a communicable disease epidemic.”

As usual, critics apportioned blame for the epidemic among their favorite bêtes noires. Those who disapproved of the rise of fast food chains blamed them, especially after, in 2000, they took to “superizing” their products and tempting people with even cheaper calorie-laden foods. McDonald’s, which earlier was criticized for avoiding center-city sites for its outlets, was now attacked for opening them there and tempting the poor with its fattening products. Large food processors producing crispy fat-laden snack foods were another favorite target. They were charged with “spending billions of dollars on advertising and promotion to create an environment that constantly pressures us to eat.” Commercial television, on which much of the promotion occurred, was also assailed. Not only was it said to provide the favorite venue for consuming these fattening foods, it also enticed young people away from physical activities that would help them control their weight, contributing to what many said was the most alarming aspect of the problem, a startling rise in childhood obesity.

Typically, though, in a nation averse to recognizing class differences, most of those urging a massive campaign played down the class-specific nature of the problem. The Centers for Disease Control’s call, in October, 2000, to develop a “national, comprehensive plan” to combat the epidemic emphasized that “obesity continued to increase among both men and women across all sociodemographic groups.” Yet it was clear that although it was a very serious health problem, it was so mainly among poorer Americans, especially African-Americans and Hispanics, who were developing diabetes and other obesity-related diseases at alarming rates. The better-off spent billions on diet foods, diet books, weight-loss programs, and exercise equipment, while measures to cut public school funding, such as those in California’s Proposition 13,
deprived poor children of much-needed physical education programs.2 In December, 2001, Surgeon General David Satcher issued yet another call to combat "the epidemic" of overweight and obesity, which he said affected 61 percent of Americans and was "associated with" 300,000 deaths a year, almost as many as smoking. Again, although the report did mention that the problem was more severe among the poor and certain ethnic groups, the emphasis was on its being a "community" one.2 The point was underscored by the secretary of health, who pledged to lose fifteen pounds over the next year.21

The report added fuel to the fires of the growing band of anti-fat crusaders who demanded the government go much further to protect the public's health than the surgeon general suggested. There were calls for taxes on fatty foods and perhaps subsidies for healthy foods. Fat people, it was said, should recognize that they were placing an unnecessary burden on the health system and should be made to pay for it, figuratively and literally. This approach seemed to echo the anti-smoking crusade, which sought to tax and confine smokers for their own and the public good. The most striking parallel with smoking, though, lay in regard to class. In Europe, where many upper- and middle-class people still smoked, the anti-smoking campaign had little impact other than to provide some justification for already-high taxes on cigarettes. In the United States, on the other hand, during the 1970s and 1980s the middle class abandoned smoking in droves, and by the 1990s it had become quite declassé to light up. With smoking now identified mainly with the lower classes, it was easy for middle-class authorities to enact stringent new anti-smoking restrictions. It now seemed that, despite the efforts to portray the obesity problem as crossing all lines, the anti-fat crusade might lead in a similar direction. As smoking, it was the poor who were thought to be the most unconcerned with the health consequences of their actions. The old stereotypes persisted, and little account was taken of the actual circumstances of their lives and food choices. Rarely was it pointed out that fatty and sugar-rich diets were much more economical for the poor than ones based on fresh fruit and vegetables. They were all assumed to spend their lives sitting in front of TVs, gorging themselves on calorie-rich snack foods and shuffling off to eat supersized burgers at fast food outlets without a thought for the burden their actions put on the health care system. Also, as in the anti-smoking campaign, this emphasis on the unwillingness or inability of the offenders to control their behavior provided a delicious sop for moral superiority to the calls for them to stop their weak-willed acts.24 And willpower was thought to be the key. The popular television star Oprah Winfrey told her massive audience that of all the things she had achieved in an impressive, achievement-filled life, the greatest was losing weight.25

In the late 1990s, a new emphasis on eating "functional foods" seemed to present a welcome respite from the multitude of warning calls to eat less of various things. This call for Americans to "think positively" about foods, and eat ones that would—through their own innate qualities or with the help of food processors—positively promote good health and longevity, received enthusiastic support from health authorities and especially from food producers.28 Although the University of California, Berkeley, Wellness Letter hailed it as the "New Nutrition Revolution," in many ways it recalled the ideas of the Newer Nutrition of earlier in the century, with its high hopes for vitamin-packed foods. The newsletter listed the "top 100 foods" in terms of how much they contained of the life-prolonging nutrients. Eight of these nutrients were vitamins and minerals, while one was the anti-oxidant beta carotene and another was fiber. Whereas the Newer Nutrition had promised much in terms of preventing childhood illnesses and providing "pep" and "energy," functional foods promised to head off the illnesses of an aging population, mainly heart disease and cancer.29 Sam Bass, a Washington lawyer who helped write the 1994 regulations allowing what amounted to guarded health claims for such foods, said that people no longer ate just "for nutrition." They "also want to prevent ill health and stay out of managed care hospitals, which is what functional foods are all about."30 The similarities with the Newer Nutrition did carry over into a struggle between food producers and pharmaceutical companies to exploit the new trend. In this case, the pharmaceuticals got a head start, rushing out such items as cholesterol-lowering spreads and salad dressings. Novartis, a pharmaceutical giant and food producer, came out with a line of biscuits, drinks, and muesli that it said would strengthen bones and aid digestion. Somewhat belatedly, the food conglomerate Unilever came out with its own cholesterol-lowering spread and dressings. The head of nutritional research at Novartis hailed these foods as responding to contemporary consumer needs: "Consumers," he said, "are now linked by a common interest. Everybody wants to live longer but nobody wants to grow older." Unfortunately for his firm, its products seemed to do little for consumers' taste buds. William Grimes, the New York Times restaurant critic, said Novartis's apricot cereal bar had the "texture of a rubber eraser, enlivened by a hideously artificial flavor."31

Grimes was hardly more complimentary to most of the other processed functional foods he tasted, and their future looked cloudy, but the loosened restrictions on making health claims for foods allowed producers of foods that already pleased consumers' tastes to market them as life extending. The H.J. Heinz Company used studies showing that cooked tomatoes might reduce the risk of prostate and cervical cancer to market its ketchup. Chocolate lovers were delighted by research (much of it funded and publicized by chocolate manufacturers) showing that chocolate lowered LDL levels.32 Functional foods were also right up the alley of Prevention magazine, which had been making similar claims for foods for years. It now had conventional medical backing for articles such as "Cut Your Heart Attack Risk in Half, with Nuts!" "Lower Your Blood Pressure with Celery!" "Prevent Breast Cancer with Grapefruit!" and even "Quick PMS Relief with Rice!"33

Yet the honor rolls of health-enhancing foods seemed to change with about the same rapidity as those of death-dealing ones. The ink was hardly dry on the University of California health newsletter when hopes for both
beta carotene and fiber came crashing down. The belief that beta carotene would prevent the number-one killer, lung cancer, as well as perform other health miracles, turned out to be unfounded. Indeed, some studies showed that quite the reverse might be the case, and that beta carotene might contribute to the development of some cancers. As for fiber, researchers now warned that not only did it not prevent colorectal and other intestinal cancers but that, when added to foods in the form of bran, it might actually increase one's chances of contracting such ailments. Then, people who sought out foods containing vitamin E in the not-unreasonable expectation that its antioxidant properties would head off heart disease were disillusioned by studies indicating that this was not at all the case. However, in December, 2001, it was announced that vitamins E and C, as well as beta carotene, did seem to protect the eyesight of aging people. And so it went, and so it will continue to go.

Calling such things as rising rates of obesity “epidemics” could be seen as part of the twentieth-century trend toward medicalizing ailments that had previously been seen as the result of moral failings—the kind of process that changed madness into mental illness and drunkenness into alcoholism. Yet, as we have seen, many of the attacks on fat, both internal and external, also had a distinctly moralistic tone. Now not only were there “good” and “bad” fats, but also ill-health was viewed as the result of individuals’ behavior, of choices that they themselves made. This was in large part the product of another sea change in attitudes toward disease that had resulted from Americans’ changing perceptions of what was going to kill them. During the twentieth century, the major causes of death changed from infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, and diarrhea, to chronic ones, such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Battling the older killers involved protecting oneself against invasive germs. Combating the newer, chronic ones was thought to involve asserting control over “the vagaries of one’s body” by changing one’s behavior. This drive to take responsibility for one’s salvation by controlling what one ate recalled the moralism that has so often accompanied American crusades for health reform, since the days in the early nineteenth century when the Reverend Sylvester Graham preached against the physical and morally debilitating effects of white bread and masturbation, which he saw as interconnected. It emerged in a different form in the late 1990s, in such things as the new message of Dean Ornish, the low-fat diet guru, who discovered the curative powers of love, family, and sobriety and developed a “lifestyle program” for health and longevity that used “group support” to bring out the “love and intimacy” that would open up “the healing power of connection.”

In particular, though, one continued to hear the echoes of the 1960s reform movements. Although one now read more about the Counterculture and New Left on the obituary pages than the opinion pages, many of their central tenets regarding food persisted. Variations on the New Left idea that

“the personal is the political” continued to resonate. Although the issues may have changed, most of the enemies, in the form of large-scale capitalist enterprises and the scientists they employed, remained the same. There was a growing demand for “organic” crops and meats, preferably produced by family farmers. When the new edition of the Food Technology called the book full of “contemporary counterculture myths.” Most supermarkets now carried organic foods, and state and federal officials who had previously derided the concept of “organic” as meaningless or impossible to define now struggled with the problem of how to certify these foods as authentic. Throughout much of this there persisted the idea that there were morally good and morally bad foods. Each issue of the newsletter of the influential Center for Science in the Public Interest, which had originated in the radical uprisings of the late 1960s, had two lists of foods: one was called “The Right Stuff,” the other called “Food Porn.”

Although Americans increased their per capita meat consumption by about 10 percent in the last two decades of the century, vegetarianism became more accepted in the wider society. This was largely because so many middle- and particularly upper-middle-class young people were taking it up, for reasons ranging from health concerns to moral ones such as animal rights and environmental issues. Middle-class families gathering at holidays or weddings which had normally featured large servings of meat now had to provide non-fleshy alternatives as well. Both fine and fast food restaurants now had to have at least some vegetarian menu items. Yet while many meat eaters came to appreciate that meatless main dishes could indeed make for pleasurable eating, the organized vegetarian movement remained fragmented and on the margins, with its number of adherents static. In a rather bizarre twist, one vegetarian animal rights group reached out to someone else on the fringe. It asked Timothy McVeigh, convicted of killing 168 people by bombing the Oklahoma City federal building, to adopt a vegan diet as he awaited execution on death row. When McVeigh, an ardent hunter, responded with some reservations, the vegan leader promised that adopting the diet “would be very positive for his soul.”

Many of the people attracted to organic foods and vegetarianism also joined in the attack on genetically modified (GM) foods, a target that seemed made-to-order for the heirs of both the New Left and the Counterculture. The fact that their most visible producers were giant American corporations such as Monsanto and Dupont (the much-reviled producer of napalm during the Vietnam War) allowed leftists to link them with the latest form of American economic and cultural imperialism, now said to be lurking under the cloak of “globalization.” Moreover, the fact that producing GM foods seemed to involve scientific manipulation of basic life forces offended the persisting romanticism of the heirs of the Counterculture. People with this mind-set, which elevated the emotions over reason and looked upon science as an amoral, unfeeling threat to life on earth, saw GM foods as “Franken-foods.” A typical speaker at a conference denouncing genetic engineering
called it "an assault on life... a demand to control" that would lead to "Farmeddon." Others warned that the new kinds of plants would destroy the health and lifestyles of Third World peasants—those whose food cultures, it will be recalled, the Counterculture had held in such high esteem. Yet although these concerns struck chords among some Americans, they failed to really arouse a nation where most people could see no wrong in the spread of the American Way abroad and still thought of science, or at least the Food and Drug Administration, as a benign force in their daily lives. Indeed, there was much less opposition to the altered foods in the United States than in Europe, which in the late 1990s had been made sensitive to food-safety issues by the appearance of a human variant of "mad cow" disease. In 1999, at the height of the European uproar over GM foods, the Gallup Poll reported that American concern over these foods "barely registers a ripple," a result that was repeated two years later.

Perhaps the most revealing statistic about how Americans ate in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, had nothing to do with science or health. It was the revelation that for the first time, less than a quarter of American households were made up of married couples with children. The decline resulted from a number of factors. More people were delaying both marriage and having children, more couples were living longer after their children left home, and during the 1990s the number of single-parent families increased much more than the number of married couples with children. When one then factors in the already-large proportion of married women with children who worked outside the home—women with little time for traditional meal preparation—one has some impressive reasons for the continuing migration of food preparation out of the household.

Of course, home economists had been remarking on the decline of the home as a food-production center since the early 1900s, but they tended to think in terms of technology such as canning and factory bread baking that still left housewives with the major responsibility for preparing family meals. Now, however, not only had most aspects of food preparation substantially left the home, food consumption was rapidly following it. This was reflected in the continuing boom in eating out. From 1990 to 1999 sales by commercial food-service establishments offering meals and snacks to the general public more than doubled. Although lunchrooms, full-service restaurants, cafeterias, and recreation facilities such as sports and entertainment complexes racked up impressive gains, fast food outlets continued to lead the pack, raking in almost twice as much income in 1999 ($275 billion) as restaurants and lunchrooms. Fast food chains now had outlets in ball parks, gas stations, supermarkets, and Wal-Marts, as well as on college campuses, and their products were widely available in elementary and high schools. Home consumption of food was shored up mainly by pizza and other home delivery services as well as stores and supermarkets selling so-called home replace-

ment meals—fully prepared "home-style" meals with a choice of several entrees and a variety of side dishes. Is it yet another paradox that the decline in home cooking seemed to be accompanied by a rising interest in food preparation? After all, in 2000 and 2001 books by and about cooks were regularly on the best-seller lists, while a number of television cooking shows developed large and enthusiastic followings. In this instance the answer would be "probably not," for in both cases it seemed to be Americans' fascination with celebrities, rather than practical advice, that was at play. Many of the cookbooks were by celebrity chefs, purchased more as souvenirs than for the kitchen, and some of the most popular of the food books involved revelations about the restaurant business. As for television, the appeal of how-to shows such as those of Bobby Flay and Emeril Lagasse were based much more on the chefs' personalities than on their recipes, while shows such as "Iron Chef," featuring competitive cooking, with cooks racing against the clock or each other, were pure entertainment. As a New York Times reporter said, "Chefs have replaced hairstylists as celebrity exotics, and television shows like 'Iron Chef' ... remind one of the World Wide Wrestling Federation for foodies." Both fast food outlets and supermarkets' shelves also reflected the trend toward the globalization of the production and marketing of foodstuffs. The age-old bugaboo of seasonality in fresh fruits and vegetables continued to disappear, as jumbo jets flew in such spring-time products as asparagus and strawberries from Chile in the fall and apples from New Zealand in the spring. The number of foreign items in supermarkets also continued to expand as they began carrying a wider variety of foreign fruits and vegetables and devoting sections to processed Mexican, Chinese, Indian, and Thai foods. Italian food products were so much a part of the normal diet that they were integrated into the regular shelves. Mexican-style salsa, which now outsold ketchup in much of the nation, was often placed alongside shools of packaged tortilla chips, which replaced potato chips as the crispy snack of choice in many health-conscious middle-class homes.

This cornucopia of foreign foods and the widespread acceptance of foreign-tasting dishes seems to reflect more than just the increased availability of new foods. It also seems to have been linked to the decline of another historic feature of British-American food culture: neophobia, or fear of new foods. As we saw earlier, this fear is in part the natural outcome of our being omnivores. However, as we have also seen in this volume and its predecessor, Americans tended to be particularly distrustful of foreign foods. Before World War One only the upper classes had a high regard for foreign food, and this meant only French food. Chapter Fourteen shows how, in the late 1960s and 1970s a kind of neophilia—a love for new foods—began taking off among the upper-middle classes. One of the reasons for this change was identical to that underlying the pre-World War One upper class's attraction to French food: It implied having the cosmopolitan tastes and world-view that foreign travel was supposed to bring. It is probably no accident that
middle-class Americans began to regard being open to new food tastes as a sign of distinction during the 1960s, when the introduction of jets began making overseas travel affordable to more of them. Although the foreign foods one encountered abroad may well have seemed too unsanitary, too spicy, or too repulsive even to taste, one still gained distinction by returning from trips saying one had acquired a taste for this or that exotic food—that one had tasted seal meat or kangaroo and it didn’t taste at all bad. On the other hand, to return from Australia saying with disgust, “Ugh, people actually eat kangaroo there,” or to admit that one had eaten nothing but the inoffensive “international style” meals laid out for tour groups, marked one as not having been “broadened” at all by travel. As a result, as the century drew to a close and members of the upper-middle class in particular sought out increasingly exotic travel destinations, neophobia steadily became déclassé among them.

By then as well it seemed that this attitude had been moving down the class ladder: Increasing sales of foreign-sounding foods in both supermarkets and fast food restaurants seemed to indicate that neophobia was weakening among the lower-middle and working classes as well.

Of course the old rules using taste “markers” and other alterations to Americanize the new foreign foods and dishes still applied. Yet it is in this regard that Americans were truly part of a globalized process, for “foreign” foods and tastes were invading diets throughout the world. From Scotland and the Netherlands to Taiwan and Australia, people were adopting new foods and tastes into their diets using more or less the same techniques to domesticate them. The great irony (one dare not use “paradox” yet again) is that while it was American-style fast food that aroused the most controversy abroad, much of its appeal in foreign countries was not unlike foreign foods’ appeal to the American middle class: It symbolized sophistication and modernity.

It was natural that some of those seeking to preserve their cultures’ distinctive food habits would fear the influence of the reigning military, economic, and cultural superpower. Yet the extent to which they follow in the United States’ footsteps in regard to food habits, at least, will not be determined by the strength of multinationals’ tentacles or the lure of U.S. fast food chains. It will be determined instead by how their own particular cultures respond to the forces of industrialization and globalization. The new service-based economies and the increased participation of women in the work force are bringing on such things as the migration of food preparation from the home into many different places. However, as McDonald’s and Pizza Hut have discovered, this does not necessarily mean that Quarter-Pounders-with-cheese and pizza with pineapple lie in store for everyone. Sedentary work is replacing manual labor throughout the West, but in countries such as France obesity is not yet, at least, perceived as anything like the problem that it presents in the United States. Populations are aging everywhere, but nowhere else does the idea that death need not be inevitable seem so prevalent as in America. In other words, we may all be facing similar dilemmas, including the omnivore’s one, but not everyone is responding the same way as Americans are. Not only do other cultures have different social and political histories, few of their food cultures are the product of the same confrontation with abundance as that of the United States. They too may be struggling to deal with paradoxes, but they are often not the same ones that Americans face.