

Food for Thought

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last week I wrote about new rules proposed by the United States Department of Agriculture to update the nutrition standards for meals served through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. The proposal calls for more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat milk, while limiting levels of saturated fat, sodium, calories, and trans fats in school meals.

While I can always pack lunches for my kids, it's very reassuring to know that when they take hot lunch at school, they will be given healthy choices. Inspired by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 signed into law by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move!' initiative, our family has vowed to get healthier at home, too.

Instead of chicken nuggets, we've been eating grilled chicken. Now we have fresh fish as opposed to fish sticks. I'm even starting to eat vegetables without breading and deep frying them. But I still eat them with ketchup.

Now, when we go grocery shopping, we look for things that don't have saturated or trans fat or preservatives. We put food into the cart that has whole grains, is high in antioxidants or is organic. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what makes a food "organic." Thankfully, the USDA is always looking out for me.

The classification of food as "organic" is the result of the Organic Foods Production Act, which was enacted as part of the 1990 Farm Bill. The Act authorized a new USDA National Organic Program (NOP) to set national standards for the production, handling, and processing of organically grown agricultural products. The NOP also oversees the mandatory certification of organic production.

According to the USDA, organic food is produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations. Organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic food is produced without using: most conventional pesticides; fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge; bioengineering; or ionizing radiation. Before a product can be labeled "organic," a government-approved certifier inspects the farm where the food is grown to make sure the farmer is following all the rules necessary to meet USDA organic standards.

In addition to the proposed rule about school lunches, the USDA is being asked to revise rules on how the hens that lay organic eggs should be treated. Current rules require organic livestock to spend time outdoors where they can engage in what the agency calls "natural behavior." However, the rules don't set parameters for the outdoor space. For example, some organic farmers give their hens time to scratch and peck in pastures, while on many big farms the outdoor space consists of enclosures on concrete patios. The USDA has not yet decided whether to take up the matter.

While the USDA plays chicken with the egg question, last week it delivered a blow to the producers of organic alfalfa, which is generally grown for hay. The Department now allows the widespread planting of genetically modified alfalfa, ending a lengthy legal and regulatory process with organic producers. Opponents of the ruling complain that modified seeds can contaminate their organic seeds through pollination. Instead, the USDA will do additional research on preventing cross contamination of seeds and improving detection of that contamination.

We may be eating better as a family, but I'm not eating alfalfa, even if it is surrounded in cheese, deep-fried and served with ketchup.

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