WN *Updates*

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Editor's note. Welcome to this new department of *World Nutrition*. It is made up of short communications designed to add new information to *WN* commentaries and other contributions. Updates will often be written by the authors of contributions but are invited from all readers. Unlike letters, updates can be to *WN* and other contributions published at any time. Please address contributions for publication to wn.updates@gmail.com. Usual length for main text of updates is between 100 and 850 words. Any references should usually be limited to up to 10. Updates are edited for length and style, may be developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.

Ultra-processed product addiction
What industry executives know



Access pdf of September 2012 editorial here
Access pdf of September 2012 commentary here
Access pdf of November 2012 home page news story here
Access pdf of March 2013 commentary here

Our news team reports from New York

Are some food products addictive? Towards the end of last year *WN* ran a commentary and editorial on this controversial topic, whose cover picture is above (1,2), and there was a later Association website home page story (3). Last month another *WN* commentary told how *New York Times* correspondent Michael Moss has discovered that senior food industry executives are well aware of the compulsive nature of their ultra-processed products (4). Michael Moss's book has become an immediate number one best-seller in the US. Here he says more on the issue of habituation and addiction, in an interview with *Time* magazine (5).

It's pretty widely known that sugary cereals are not good for you. What surprised you?

How concerted and targeted is the effort by food companies to hit the magical formulation. Take sugar. The optimum amount of sugar in a product became known as the 'bliss point'. Food inventors and scientists spend a huge amount of time formulating the perfect amount of sugar that will send us over the moon, and send products flying off the shelves.

When it came to fat, it was the amazing role of what the industry calls the 'mouth feel'. That's the warm, gooey taste of cheese, or the bite into a crisp fried chicken that rushes right to the same pleasure centres of the brain that sugar does, but fat is carrying twice as many calories, so it is more problematic from an obesity standpoint.

The industry is itself hooked on salt. It is this miracle ingredient that solves all of their problems. There is the flavour burst to the salt itself, but it also serves as a preservative, so foods can stay on the shelves for months. It also masks a lot of the off-notes in flavours inherent to processed foods.

Do you believe these foods can be considered 'addictive?'

That is the word industry hates: 'addiction'. They prefer words like 'craveability' and 'allure'. Sugar uses the same neurological pathways as narcotics to hit the pleasure centres of the brain that send out the signals: 'eat more, eat more'. Industry defends itself by saying true narcotic addiction has certain technical thresholds that you just don't find in food addiction. That's true, but in some ways getting unhooked on foods is harder than getting unhooked on narcotics, because you can't go cold turkey. Nora Volkow, head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Washington, says that it's more difficult for people to control their eating habits than narcotics.

Were you surprised by how many scientists and food company executives avoid their own products?

It was everything from a former top scientist at Kraft saying he used to maintain his weight by jogging, and then he blew out his knee and couldn't exercise, his solution was to avoid sugar and all caloric drinks, including all the Kool-Aid and sugary drinks that Kraft makes. Then there was the former top scientist at Frito-Lay. I spent days at his house going over documents relating to his efforts at Frito-Lay to push the company to cut back on salt. He served me plain, cooked oatmeal and raw asparagus for lunch. We toured his kitchen, and he did not have one single processed food product in his cupboards or refrigerator.

The scientists and executives were pretty honest about their roles in creating unhealthy food. Did you get the impression they felt guilty about their products?

They don't eat their own products, because they know better. They know about the addictive properties of sugar, salt and fat. As insiders, they know too much. I think a lot of them have come to feel badly. But not to the point of blaming themselves necessarily, because the older ones invented a number of these products back in the days when dependency on them was much lower. In the 70s and the 80s for example, we were eating more home cooked meals from scratch and eating more mindfully. As we became more dependent on these conveniences, these people came to see their work with real misgivings.

What do you think is the greatest obstacle standing in the way of federal regulation of salt, sugar and fat?

The playing field needs to be levelled in terms of pricing. We all know we should be eating more fresh vegetables and fresh fruits. When you hit that part of the store and you see that blueberries cost $US 5 for a little basket and you can wheel over to the centre of the store and see all these power bars and seemingly healthy things that are in fact loaded with salt, sugar and fat, and they are half the price or a third the price; and there are all these other things that can fill up your cart for much less money. That's a really difficult thing for families to deal with. Everyone is convinced that the government subsidies that support processed food need to be shifted over in some way to fresh fruits and vegetables or it's going to continue to be hard for even people who want to eat better to do so financially.

Do you think there's any change in sight?

I think we are at a real tipping point here. What I hear from people inside the food industry is that the food giants are scared to death right now. The pressure from the White House to do something to fight obesity is increasing. The pressure from Wall Street on profits has never been greater. The pressure from consumers for better, healthier products has never been greater.

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Andean food and nutrition systems

Quinoa a world resource – official



Access pdf of July 2012 editorial here
Access pdf of July 2012 commentary here
Access pdf of August 2012 commentary here
Access pdf of UN announcement here

Enrique Jacoby writes from Lima, Peru

The International Year of Quinoa was launched at the United Nations General Assembly on 20 February. This follows the two *WN* commentaries on Peruvian food culture that I prepared and wrote with Patricia Murillo, published last year with the *WN* cover picture shown in miniature above. This followed announcement of the UN quinoa year by the *UN General Assembly*.

The symbolic value is great. As we wrote: 'In the Incan culture, *quinoa* was referred to as *chisiya mama* or "mother grain". The Spanish discouraged its cultivation because of its use in indigenous religious ceremonies. *Quinoa* stayed marginalised but was never lost among Andean people, going unnoticed among the urban population until the last century'.

But now as you see here below (left), in New York the First Lady of Peru Nadine Heredia Alarcón de Humala and UN Food and Agriculture director-general José Graziano da Silva have joined in launching the *quinoa* year, as (right) did Bolivian president Evo Morales. After the address by UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon (see Box 1, below) the launch was followed by lunch – with quinoa, naturally.



A great day in February for Andean food systems and culture at the United Nations General Assembly: the official launch of the UN Year of Quinoa

After suppression by the Spanish, *quinoa* has once again become a valued food of the Andean people, and the urban middle classes. More than half the world's crop of 70,000 tonnes a year is cultivated in Peru and Bolivia. Here it is below as we showed it last year, as a grain for home-made breakfast cereals and as the main ingredient in versions of soups, tamales, risottos and desserts, and as shown here, *taboulleh*.



Here is quinoa as gathered (left) and (right) used in a type of taboulleh salad. Quinoa is versatile used as a grain, and also is naturally grown in the Andes

Box 1

Quinoa celebrated

Here is an extract of UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon's introduction of the year of quinoa. 'This extraordinary grain has been a cultural anchor and a staple in the diet of millions of people throughout the Andes for thousands of years. Now *quinoa* is poised for global recognition.

'The grain has two great advantages. First, it is highly nutritious. It is gluten-free, contains all the essential oils and amino acids, and is a good source of calcium, iron and protein. Second, quinoa is adaptable. It can be grown in many different ecological and climatic conditions – including where soil moisture is low. This is especially important in a warming world, in which desertification and land degradation are becoming ever more pressing issues. Quinoa cultivation is expanding from the Andean region to include Kenya, India, North America and Europe. Most quinoa growers are small-scale farmers. The crop holds the promise of improved income – a key plank of the Zero Hunger Challenge. Some of the poorest Andean indigenous smallholders have already benefitted greatly from rising prices with the growing popularity of quinoa in export markets.

'The government of Bolivia is supplying *quinoa* as part of a nutritional supplement programme to pregnant and nursing women, and Peru is incorporating *quinoa* in school breakfasts. I believe *quinoa* can make an important contribution to post-2015 development strategies'.

In his address, Secretary-general Ban also said 'But let us also beware of potential pitfalls. As prices rise along with export demand, the poor risk being excluded from their staple grain in local markets in favour of cheaper, less nutritious processed food. Even growers can be tempted to sell all their crop and eat less healthily'.

Because of worldwide demand, and quinoa now being a hot commodity in Bolivia and Peru, this is now happening. Peasants' income are rising so now they eat less quinoa and sell more of it, and have money for beer and fast food. Quinoa is also now very expensive in cities like Lima. Andean countries have to export or perish.

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Food prices, riots and wars

Food riots go global



Access pdf of June 2011 editorial here
Access pdf of June 2011 commentary here
Access pdf of August 2011 home page news story here
Access pdf of November 2012 home page news story here
Access pdf of February 2013 home page news story here

Claudio Schuftan writes from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Food riots continue to make news. Food insecurity causes hunger. It also is a cause of unrest, riots and wars. This is what I pointed out in my *WN* commentary of June 2011 (1), as did an accompanying editorial (2), with the French revolution (the WN cover picture depicted above) and the current North African uprisings as examples.



February 2013. Food riots in Argentina (left) and Algeria (right). All over the world, food-insecure populations are becoming more desperate and angry

Food insecurity of the type caused by incompetent or corrupt governance, greedy and rapacious suppliers, foreign distortion or appropriation of local food systems, or all of the above, are not acts of nature. Insecurity and poverty are being made worse by food as a plaything of commodity traders and speculators (3-5).

Updated information and commentary is carried by a *Guardian* report last month. Based on current events, the report predicted that food rioting will become a global norm (6). Extracts follow. 'The fundamental triggers for the Arab spring were unprecedented food price rises, triggering food riots across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. A month before the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization reported record high food prices for dairy, meat, sugar and cereals…'

Now things are worse. 'The global industrial food system is increasingly unsustainable… Droughts exacerbated by global warming in key food-basket regions have already led to a 10-20 per cent drop in rice yields over the past decade. Last year, four-fifths of the US experienced a heat-wave and there were prolonged droughts in Russia and Africa. But climate is not the only problem. Industrial farming methods are breaching the biophysical limits of the soil. High oil prices will continue to feed into the oil-dependent industrial food system'.



January 2013. Zambia president Michael Sata, speaking after bread price rises, says that founding president Kenneth Kaunda was overthrown after food riots

Finally, the key point. 'Speculation on the future prices of food commodities by banks drives prices higher, increasing profits at the expense of millions of the world's poor. In the context of economies wracked by debt, this creates a perfect storm of problems which will guarantee high prices – eventually triggering civil unrest – for

the foreseeable future. The link between intensifying inequality, debt, climate change, fossil fuel dependency and the global food crisis is now undeniable. As population and industrial growth continue, the food crisis will only get worse'.

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