
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

AG RESEARCH, ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

I have never written a letter of protest – until today. The column by John Lee on a “Farmer’s Diary”, published in the Spring 2007 issue of *edible Boston*, contains ill-informed and misguided comments about ‘food science’ research institutes. In his column Mr. Lee states:

“Nor for that matter is real food on the agenda of the major ‘food science’ research institutes. Rather it is more apt to be ‘better’ (read ‘cheaper’) ways to use high fructose corn syrup derived from the over-production of corn to flavor otherwise tasteless corn-fed chicken, pork or beef. Your tax dollars are swelling the pockets of the folks whose sole purpose in life is to swell your waistline and fatten your fanny!”

As a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists, who teaches food science at Framingham State College and the Harvard School of Public Health, and who has spent more than thirty years in agricultural and food chemistry research, I feel qualified to comment about the work of food scientists and food science research institutes. Since the turn of the last century, food science has made major contributions to enhancing the quality, quantity, and safety of food. More than 200 years ago the British economist Thomas Malthus wrote his famous *“Essay on the Principle of Population”*. Malthus warned that a rapidly growing world population (estimated at one billion people in 1800) could soon outrun the supply of food. Since then the population has swelled to over 6 billion people. During this time the supply of food has kept pace with the population thanks in large part to the excellent research in agriculture and food science. The current limitations are due to poor distribution and affordability of food rather than quantity. Agricultural research has led to greatly increased yields per acre, while food science has developed methods for preserving and ensuring the safety of food, thus reducing spoilage and contamination.

The comment by Mr. Lee that food science research institutes spend tax dollars on researching high fructose corn syrup is completely false. A search of the *Journal of Food Science*, published by the Institute of Food Technologists, shows that only twenty one papers were concerned with research on high fructose corn syrup, out of a total of more than 7,500 papers published in this journal since 1979. As one of the leading journals of food science research in the World, the papers published in

this journal are representative of the research conducted at the major food science institutes in the United States. Furthermore, with the very limited Government funds spent on food science research in the US (not to be confused with agricultural subsidies), food scientists are hardly swelling their pockets with the sole purpose of swelling your waistline and fattening your fanny! I agree with Mr. Lee that high fructose corn syrup is used far too widely in processed food. Most of the research on HFCS has been conducted by food companies seeking ways to reduce costs and improve margins. Research by Drs. George Bray and Barry Popkin suggests a strong link between the consumption of high levels of HFCS and obesity. However, many other factors also appear to play a role in the cause of obesity.

Like many other scientists in the field of food science, I am an avid gardener, love to cook, and value the quality of fresh local food ingredients. Perhaps more than most we understand the difficulties and rewards of producing “real food.”

I urge Mr. Lee, and others who feel as he does, to work with food scientists to produce better, more wholesome food for everyone.

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John D. Lee responds:

Congratulations on a lengthy and well-intentioned response! It is difficult to pack enough materials to cover all the bases in a short op-ed piece and all are entitled to their opinions. Without a doubt, the food supply in many parts of the world has, in fact, kept pace with population increase. Distribution and politics are, indeed, major reasons why there are inequities in the global food supply. Certainly, the ‘green revolution’ in parts of Asia has not been a roaring success to point out one example. Of course, there are food research institutes which have done excellent work in bringing not only nutritious but bio-genetically enhanced products to the market (rices, for example). Nonetheless, I do not shirk from any assertion that there is an indisputable trend in developing nations to produce and export cheap ‘food’ produced as ‘cheaply’ as possible by as few entities as possible.