

Higher Food Prices: When More is More

—Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen

Low prices seem good. Young or old, male or female, rich or not, we've all felt the satisfaction of getting something for less than we think it's worth. Whether at a thrift shop or sample sale, discount outlet or price club, at the farmers' market or on the stock market, everybody loves a good deal. Getting a steal, we feel savvy, lucky, and fulfilled.

Low prices also seem responsible. Often struggling to make ends meet, most of us are lucky if we eke out some savings for college, retirement, or just a plain old rainy day. Afraid we can't afford the best for our children, we try to maximize our earnings by pouncing on the cheapest stuff. Paying low prices seems smart, justified, and grounded.

But, when it comes to food, are we really better off buying cheaper items? Are low prices really good and responsible when we consider the dangers that can surface in our food supply due to cheaper standards? As parents, are we really doing our children favors by feeding them low-cost victuals?

Consider the following contradictions:

—Farmed salmon may be cheaper than its wild brethren, but it also contains higher levels of organochlorine contaminants, including PCBs and dioxins, which can cause cancer and disrupt our hormonal systems.

—While fast food may be cheap, it can also likely lead to obesity, and studies show that obesity, which is on the rise in America, increases the risk of developing a host of health problems including type 2 diabetes and several types of cancer. These obesity-related health problems in turn account for billions of dollars in medical spending each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

—Herbicides may make farming more efficient and cheaper on a grand scale, but they may also end up contaminating our watersheds with endocrine disrupting chemicals. Studies show that atrazine, for example, which is banned in several European countries but widely used in the U.S., is likely linked to the feminization of frogs.

—Confinement feeding may allow agribusinesses to raise larger numbers of animals in smaller spaces, and hence be cheaper than more traditional operations. But the same tight quarters can lead to sicklier livestock and a higher likelihood of food-borne illnesses. For example, with poultry and eggs, reducing crowding and increasing testing of flocks can help control salmonella, according to an analysis published in April 2004 by the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

—The routine feeding of antibiotics to farm animals may seem like a cheap way to keep them healthy, but the

irresponsible overuse of these valuable drugs has led to the proliferation of resistant bacteria that can end up costing farmers dearly. Of all antibiotics produced, for example, 50% are used to treat sick animals, as growth promoters in livestock, and to rid cultivated foodstuffs of various destructive organisms, according to the World Health Organization. This ongoing low-level dosing for growth and prophylaxis also heightens fears of new resistant strains "jumping" species, it says.

—Organic food may be more expensive than conventional fare. But research shows organic food also carries lower residues of pesticides, which can be especially harmful to children. A study in the March 2003 issue of the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*, for example, suggested that "consumption of organic fruits, vegetables, and juice can reduce children's organophosphorus pesticide exposure levels from above to below the U.S. EPA's current guidelines." Other studies have found organic food also has significantly higher vitamin, mineral, and fiber content when compared to conventional food. Perhaps most importantly, organic agricultural methods reduce soil erosion and runoff, and protect farm workers and their kids from contact with neurotoxic chemicals, both directly and through "take-home" exposure on clothes and skin.


These examples fly in the face of conventional wisdom, which says that paying less is best. But all too often, we choose low prices with only short-term goals in mind. If we are to be honest with ourselves, and truly safeguard our health and that of our offspring, we can't really afford to define "safe" or "good quality" food without considering the ramifications of its production over the long-term.

To make the best food choices, we really need to reconsider how we define "expensive." Either at a farmers' market or in the grocery aisle, we should be willing to pay more for more nutritious food produced in an environmentally and socially responsible way. We should be happy to pay more to farmers who use higher standards. Doing so is both ethically and fiscally sound. Not only should we seek to avoid the breakdown of social fabric in farming regions—both in the U.S. and abroad—because it is tragic, but we might also note that ensuring economic prosperity at a local level will help minimize creeping social ills and mitigate the need for financial bailouts. At the same time, paying more now to lessen environmental degradation and human health problems will surely allow us to save money later on clean-ups and medical bills.

To be sure, some people truly can't afford to pay higher prices for food than they already do. But, if we rejigger our priorities, many of us can. For the monthly cost of a cell phone, we might pay for meat from a local farmer who uses sustainable agricultural practices. For the cost of a new DVD player or brand-name sneakers, we may be able to regularly drink antibiotic-free and rbGH-free milk from a dairy

whose cows—ruminants meant to eat grass—actually graze outside. Instead of eating farmed salmon each week, we could alternate cheap but nutritionally rich lentil stew with the wild variety.

For those who persist in believing that paying more for environmentally-friendly—or higher-quality or fairly-traded—food is an act of frivolous luxury, overactive compassion, or budgetary stupidity, I submit pure biological self-interest as a motivator. Given studies showing sperm counts are down, especially in the farm belt, and childhood diseases of environmental origin cost Americans \$55 billion annually, we should ask what the consequences of our food production and consumption will be on our bloodline.

Next time you head to the grocery store, whether you're an altruistic community activist or a self-interested economic actor pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps—and chances are you're somewhere in between—you can easily play an active role in the environmental movement just by carefully examining your food budget. As a mother-shopper-cooker-eater, I can say: The only thing better than snagging a good deal is avoiding a rip-off. 

Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen is a freelance writer and lives in Hyattsville, MD.

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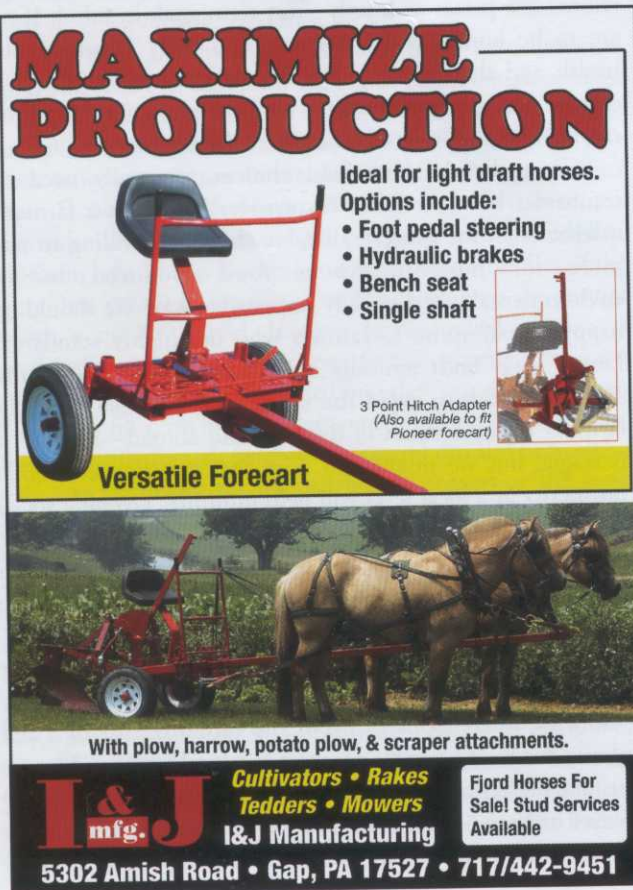
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