

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You are what you eat. The Title of a Nutritional Supplement Web Site on the Internet

Maitre Jacques Bastien was considered the Master Chef of the 26th century. Such an exalted standing was due in large measure to his supposed innovative approach to creating new delectable feasts, often consisting of dishes such as: flat pies garnished with sliced spicy sausages, mushrooms, anchovies, tomato sauce and grated cheese, piping hot from the oven; thick slices of rye bread with hot spicy beef and a yellow condiment layered between them; cylindrical sausages with a unique flavor placed in special rolls also with another version of the special yellow condiment; deep fried pieces of chicken coated with a special blend of flour and spices; grilled minced beef together with cheese, onions and various condiments; and an assortment of confections especially of the chocolate variety. These were but a few examples of his genius.

However, if the truth be told, the good Master Chef got all his culinary ideas from 20th century cookbooks which had been stored in data bases, archived and subsequently forgotten and lost. Jacques' grandfather was an archeologist who specialized in 20th century folklore and it was he who stumbled upon these data bases stored on ancient style discs. Having no use for them, he gave them to his grandson as a lark. Now it turns out that Jacques was not really a chef. His genius was in computer programming. Also his name was really Jack Basset. His wife Nikki was one of the leading psychological anthropologists of the day. She specialized in human variations that she thought were caused, over the previous six hundred years, by an environment rapidly mutating because of radical technological changes. As you will see and can well imagine, she was exploring a very fertile field.

When he browsed through the material on the disks, he was struck by how appetizing the various items appeared to be. He wondered if it would be possible to write programs that would not only resuscitate these dishes but would command a robot to prepare them. This was more complicated than it first appeared. A lot had occurred in the eating and food preparation customs since the 20th century.

About the middle of that century awareness of the importance of the environment to human health began to grow exponentially. This concern had largely been ignored because of the priority given to industrial growth. With a wealthier and more highly educated population in the industrialized world came the desire to live a longer and healthier life. This resulted in more public skepticism about the role government, the established medical profession and the established food industry played in promoting and protecting public health.

People began to seek radically different approaches to their well being and amongst the most popular was nutrition. It did not take too long before food was viewed not only as a means of sustaining life and as a pleasurable activity but also as a path to preventing and combating disease. It did not take long for so-called junk food to be completely rejected by the growing school of health advocates. Assisted by the computer in clinical epidemiology, by advanced analytical chemical techniques and by new knowledge about the body's biochemistry and physiology, scientists identified what was thought to be all essential nutritional agents, as well as their chemical makeup. By the end of the first tenth of the 21st century, nearly everyone was consuming food supplements in the form

of pills, capsules and elixirs. All of their ingredients were being extracted from natural food stuffs which had to be harvested and processed at great cost.

Shortly afterward, an important breakthrough in chemical synthesis occurred. Again with the help of very powerful computers, micro-techniques and new mass production engineering methods, it became possible to create any identifiable organic substance from the chemical elements. This included all the previously identified nutrients. A new industry consisting of the manufacture and distribution of these substances soon thrived. The eating habits of most of the world and eventually all of it changed drastically.

At first there was some resistance, mainly because the victuals were hardly palatable. They had no taste. This deficiency was quickly overcome by adding special harmless condiments to the food to stimulate taste buds. Despite the lack of variety, it did not take too long before everyone was consuming these products because of their health benefits and their economy. Everybody could afford them. The traditional food industries simply disappeared. Moreover, the resources needed were renewable so that the ecological impacts were insubstantial, unlike what traditional agricultural practices had produced. Most important of all was the discernible impact on human health. Without going into the statistical details, there was a stunning improvement.

The reverberations of these revolutionary changes continued for quite awhile but settled down to a constant pace after about three hundred years. Our Maitre Chef then introduced the innovation alluded to earlier. He programmed the computers to produce 26th century gourmet food based upon 20th century recipes he favored, except that the ingredients used were still healthy. Those factors that were harmful were rendered neutral. At the onset, these delectable dishes were so expensive that only the very rich elite could afford them. Some social tension ensued, since the intake of food had become an egalitarian exercise. However, Maitre Jacques was no fool. He set about researching how to mass produce and distribute his products. The irony was that his methods were hardly different from those of the 20th century. As you can well imagine his enterprise was very successful. Once again the eating habits of the world changed as dining lavishly became an affordable pleasure. By then everyone, including some secretive diehards who had been planting edibles in their gardens, were ingesting a totally synthetic non-natural diet.

Maitre Jacques was now enjoying his dubiously earned rewards. He had made his mark on the world. Yet there was something that had been bothering him for quite awhile and continued to do so. He could not quite put his finger on it. He knew that he was a fraud since he had never really created these new appetizing repasts. Yet it wasn't that. It became much clearer one evening when he and his wife Nikki were enjoying an after dinner conversation with their dessert and coffee. Nikki had just come across some startling findings.

"Dear, I wonder if there is any relationship between what I have discovered and the radical change in human eating habits since the 20th century?"

"What findings are you referring to?" asked Jacques.

"Well, for instance, in the last three hundred years, there has not been a major breakthrough in science, the arts, space exploration, sports or any other human endeavor one can imagine. Where are the Beethovens, Newtons, Galileos, Freuds,

Einsteins, Lincolns, Churchills and other giants? A careful examination of recent history indicates that the human race is stagnating in a mindless rut. We seem to have lost either our ability or drive to explore new ideas and new frontiers. We spend most of our time wallowing in the benefits of a computer-robot driven economy, avoiding anything we deem a risk. Things are happening that we are not aware of because we simply are no longer curious about our world in a scientific fashion. We have become like the proverbial ostriches with our heads in the sand. I wonder about the association between the change in our food habits and this phenomenon. Is it possible that the consumption of foodstuffs based solely on non-living sources is responsible? Are we in the process of becoming bland entities similar to the edibles that we have been consuming over the last three hundred years? Now more than ever I am convinced that in taking the nutritional route we have chosen, we have lost something essential to the human spirit and the survival of the human race. By that I mean humanity's former aggressive, predatory and competitive spirit."

Now Jacques understood the source of his unease.

"Have you any other misgivings?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I hesitate to mention it because its ramifications are too horrific to contemplate. Have you noticed that despite a benevolent economy and luxurious life style, the human population of the world has remained static over the last two hundred years? Why do you think that is so? For reasons that may be far fetched, I noted that the birth rate and the death rate have been equal over this period of time. I then looked into the principal causes of death and discovered, much to my surprise and trepidation, that we have become the prime prey of the earth's carnivorous predators, so much so that we are now at the bottom of the food chain. It is as if they were domesticating us as herds and it is they who determine what our population is. They seem to have a greater sense of ecological balance than we ever did. It seems that our rural and urban settings have become their ranches. In other words we are living as our former domesticated animals, those that we consumed, lived. Our fascination with make-believe, cliché ridden slogans and an inability to view the world as it really is has blinded us to the real predators that are roaming our cities at night, in search of easy prey.

Now the non-human carnivores have no need for their former prey, the herbaceous animals, who in turn now have no enemy to consume them. They, in turn overpopulate their traditional grazing areas and as a consequence, food for them is becoming scarcer. As a result they are also dying out. What I predict for our predatory enemies is that their fate will be disastrous too. After all they are consuming torpid entities which in turn will have a similar effect on them. We and they will die out since we have eliminated the supreme driving force of evolution, the instinct for survival. If you ask what if anything can be done about all this, my response is simply that I do not know. I suspect that nothing can be done."

During Nikki's discourse, Maitre Jacques's face became ashen with dread. He realized what his role in all this had been and finally recognized the source of his disquiet. In promoting synthetic gourmet food, he had made a major contribution towards the elimination of humanity's reason to live. Without any hesitation he went to his cabinet, pulled out a gun and committed suicide. Nikki felt she had no recourse but to do the same thing: she should have recognized what had happened much sooner, so that measures to overcome the situation could have been undertaken.

In due course, Nikki's predictions turned out to be devastatingly accurate. All mammals, predatory birds and reptiles disappeared. The earth became a sea of pastoral tranquillity with only the fauna, micro-organisms, non-predatory marine life and an assortment of insects and insect-like organisms in habitation.

Thousands of years passed. Then a singular occurrence took place. Some vertebrate marine life's air bladders mutated into primitive lungs. Shortly afterwards these creatures took up residence partly on land and partly in the water and it all started over again.

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