

# WHERE'S THE GOODNESS GONE?

**We are what we eat. Yet this week it was revealed that the nutrient levels in our food have fallen up to 75% over the past 60 years with devastating implications for our health. What on earth is going on?**

**W**E ARE what we eat, they say; so we should all be alarmed by new research that suggests the nutritional value of modern foods isn't just declining, it's collapsing.

And we're not talking about processed foods - the salt laden E-number-drenched evils which are well known. We're talking about basic foodstuffs, such as milk, beef, chicken and cheese.

According to an analysis published by the Food Commission, the levels of iron - a vital mineral for good human health - in the average rump steak have plummeted by 55 per cent over the past 60 years. The iron content of milk has dropped by 60 per cent over the same period, while levels of calcium have fallen by 2 per cent and magnesium by 21 per cent.

Even Cheddar cheese, the mainstay of so many a lunchtime sandwich, has seen its iron content drop by 47 per cent, while magnesium and calcium levels have fallen right across the cheese-board.

Predictably, the new findings have been attacked by the food and farming industries.

But the new findings, you see, are totally in line with other research and taken together can lead only to one truly shocking conclusion. Chemically dependent, intensive modern farming methods do not produce good, nutritious food and for one good reason: they are simply not designed to.

Even the Government admits it. Five years ago the Soil Association quoted figures from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs showing that trace mineral levels in UK fruit and vegetables had tumbled by 76 per cent.

Similar figures from the United States Department of Agriculture indicated that it wasn't just a British problem. And it isn't; it's a modern farming problem. What profit-driven modern farming is good at is producing lots of food that can be grown as quickly and cheaply as possible and looks good on the supermarket shelves.

Modern farming can produce an apple that is perfectly round, enticingly shiny and can cope happily with being left in storage for a year. If the Vitamin C content tumbles in the process, too bad.

Down on the commercial farm, quantity now triumphs over quality at every turn and, in their desperation to make even a half-way decent living, too many of today's farmers, pushed by their supermarket masters to produce high yields at low cost, seem to have

forgotten that there was a reason their grandfathers farmed in a different way.

By growing things at a slower pace and harnessing nature rather than constantly fighting it, the farmers of the Forties and Fifties produced food that was not only nutritious but tasted good too - just as nature intended.

Nowadays we have no time for that. Sixty years ago, a Scottish beef farmer would have fed his slow

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## Farmers lost their respect for one vital thing, the soil

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growing Aberdeen Angus cattle on natural pasture, rich in different grasses and herbs, for the best part of three years. The result was Scotch beef that was so good both nutritionally and taste wise that its reputation spread around the world. Now, his grandson will probably be raising a fast growing commercial breed on intensively fertilised ryegrass, the Rottweiler of modern grasses feeding supplementary, growth enhancing grain and sending the cattle to be slaughtered at 12-18 months. The result is beef that certainly looks the part, nice and red in the supermarket chill cabinet, but lacks the taste you would expect. So it is no surprise to me that modern beef has now been found to be nutritionally compromised as well. Indeed the new findings reinforce separate research showing that beef raised traditionally also has better levels of omega3 oils in its fat compared to beef reared by more intensive methods.

This sort of finding is repeated throughout the food and farming industries, with increases in yield or throughput nearly always matched by some reduction in nutritional quality.

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## The chemical firms have duped us over fertilisers

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The modern broiler chicken is stuffed with feed to

promote rapid growth, killed at four weeks and surprise, surprise its carcass is now found to contain twice the levels of fat compared to those found 60 years ago. The same goes for pork. Where once a farm pig might have grazed and rooted through paddock and woodland now it is usually fed specially formulated meal in pens. Again, the result is a fatter carcass with little or no taste, just as it is with fish. A farmed salmon has four times the fat of wild salmon and, many would argue, less than one-quarter of its taste.

Although there are many good conventional farmers around, too many modern farmers seem to have forsaken their once intimate relationship with the land.

Instead, many are on a treadmill of dependency on fertilisers, pesticides and feed that create unnatural growth. Farmers even seem to have lost their respect for the one thing that underpins all their efforts: the soil. A few decades ago, farmers tended their soil to promote natural fertility as carefully as they looked after their beasts. They would plough it almost lovingly and fertilise it with natural manures when they were available.

These not only helped to replace the three elements vital for plant growth - nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium but also restored essential minerals or trace elements and organic matter. The organic matter had an absolutely vital role to play in stabilising both the structure of the soil and its fertility. At 60 years ago soil was not expected to work as hard as it is now. Any farmers today have been duped by chemical companies into believing that you can keep taking from the soil indefinitely without anything going wrong. The consequence is that the basic quality of our food suffers.

They attempt to maintain fertility by spreading bag after bag of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium fertilisers (so-called NPK fertilisers), often without a second thought to the gradual resultant erosion in trace element levels. No wonder levels of these same elements in the food we eat have plummeted so dramatically.

Once things have gone wrong in the soil, it's very difficult to put things right.

Of course, . . . a good dollop of nitrogen fertiliser will give a burst or sappy, succulent growth but - as the new research confirms nutritionally it is the wrong sort of growth. Nitrogen-enhanced growth is largely water

vital nutrients. And once the grass is nutritionally deficient, the shortfall passes all the way up the food chain either into the milk, cheese and butter the dairy cow produces or into the beef provided by cattle bred for meat.

.But it wasn't always like this and It needn't stay like this.

Last year, research was published that clearly demonstrated that organic milk was nutritionally better for you than ordinary milk. It has higher levels of vitamin E and raised levels of certain proteins and beneficial fatty acids. At the time, the research was seen as a great boost for organic farming, but today it serves just as well as a reminder that today's organic husbandry is, to all intents and purposes, the traditional farming of 60 years ago. In other words, what was the agricultural norm in 1940 has become the premium product of today.

When it comes to the quality of our food, it is clear that you get what you pay for and yet we consumers remain happily wedded to the idea that cheap food must be good food. But why?

If someone offers to sell us a car dirt cheap, our first instinct is to ask what's wrong with it. But if Mr Sainsbury or Mr Morrison offers us cheap food, we snaffle it up, barely giving a thought as to the consequences.

Cheap food always has a hidden cost, but we tend to discover what it is only when it is too late. The most likely cause of so-called mad cow disease, you may recall, was the use of infected sheep brains in cattle feed given to cows in an effort to reduce costs.

Of course, Britain's farmers are simply doing what they have to make even a very modest and undeniably hard-earned living.

In today's brutal farming industry, that means when the supermarket says 'jump', you jump, and when the supermarket says they want it cheaper, you say 'of course'.

Because, as far as the supermarkets are concerned price is still what it is all about. '

Sure, for fruit and vegetables, they also want it clean, shiny and regularly shaped, while for meat they demand it fresh and virtually fat free. But most of all, what they want for any product is to buy it as cheaply as possible.

That is why so many modern farmers are trapped in this vicious circle, always looking for new ways of producing more food for less money. As long as the end product won't poison us or give us some awful disease then the nutritional value of that end product barely merits a second thought .

So the blame for the poor nutritional quality of modern food lies squarely with the supermarkets? Not entirely. There is, no doubt they have abused their huge buying power to drive the price they pay to farmers lower and lower, but the supermarkets, like the farmers, are simply responding to market forces.

They are responding to their customers - in short to the majority of British consumers.

Over a period of time, Britons have grown accustomed to an abundance of cheap food and that has turned us into lazy shoppers.

Faced with piles of produce that no longer reflect the passing of the seasons, we think nothing of buying strawberries in February and barely notice that our French beans have come from Zambia.

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## Can strawberries in February be at all natural?

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What matters to most of us is that the produce stays looking fresh as long as possible and is sold cheap. Flavour and nutritional value come a long way down the list.

But they shouldn't. We really are what we eat and if our food is nutritionally lacking, so are we. Yes, we can compensate by taking vitamin pills and mineral supplements but why should we need to? '

So what do we do about it? The supermarkets could certainly help by collectively declaring an end to the food price war and pay fair prices that allow most farmers to farm better but still earn a decent living. And as long as they also commit themselves not to rely on cheap produce from abroad, that too would be a start.

This would mean that many of our conventional farmers need a period of re-education. For over a decade, their eyes have been totally glued to the bottom line and a relentless drive to keep costs down. If they are finally to receive higher prices for their produce they have to commit to delivering wholesome, tasty food of impeccable nutritional quality and if that means farming less intensively then that is what they must do,

Some consumers are already prepared to pay for more natural less intensively produced food:

But the fact is that more of us need to be prepared to pay higher prices for our food.

Only when I hear a television jingle boasting that 'good food costs more at Sainsbury's' will I know that we're making real progress .

Article by:

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