

The dirt on our food

by Kay Harvey
Knight Ridder Newspaper

ST. PAUL, Minn. — You'll eat a pound of dirt in your lifetime. Most of us have heard that bit of folk wisdom. But should we believe it?

Nope. Now, the gritty truth: A pound is just the appetizer.

"We actually eat more than a pound of dirt in our lifetime," says Susan Moores, a St. Paul dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "Probably several pounds, depending on how long an individual lives."

It's a tough thing to swallow. But the good news is dirt probably won't hurt you depending on what you call dirt. Put it this way: Typical soil won't hurt you, soil and food experts say. Unless it's contaminated by things you really don't want to read about over your morning coffee.

Dirt is hardly the lone substance invading our culinary turf. It's virtually impossible to get all the foreign objects out of food on its way to processing, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. So, the FDA has settled on monitoring what it considers acceptable levels of unappetizing offenders.

Here's your official warning: Do not continue reading this story if you're eating.

In processed cornmeal, for example, FDA guidelines allow one or more whole insects, 50 or more insect fragments, two or more rodent hairs and one or more rodent excreta per 50 grams. In a can of peaches, 3 percent of the fruit can be moldy or wormy. And canned mushrooms will pass inspection if they have no more than an average 20 or more maggots per 100 grams.

Surprised? So was Jay Bell, now a faculty member in the University of Minnesota's College of Agriculture, when he once worked at a job counting tomatoes before they were shipped.

"It was my job to count the maggots, too," he says. "It was pretty amazing how high they'd let the number go."

But bugs and worms won't hurt you, either, he says. In many cultures, people

eat insects. And in many packaged products, they are exposed to heat, which kills disease-producing organisms, during processing. As a professor of soil science, Bell has the dirt on dirt, too. For those who don't make a distinction, he likes to establish the difference between soil and dirt.

"Soil is a living body that occurs on the surface of the Earth," he explains. "It has to be able to support plant material, and it usually has something grow-

they are pulled out of the ground.

"Almost any fresh fruit or vegetable is going to catch some dirt," says Moores, the dietitian. "I made a tuna salad the other day, and the celery was just stuffed with mud." She did her best to wash the mud off, a practice she advocates.

Soil and dirt aren't the only substances that get on food. "Dirt" on food is to most people "anything we're not planning on," says Donald Vesley of the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. He agrees that inert particles of dirt carrying nothing dangerous are probably irrelevant.

"What's of most concern would be pathogenic organisms, bacteria or viruses," he says. Pathogens, microorganisms able to cause disease, are the real bad guys. They can be present in raw food or make their way onto food during processing and handling.

Publicized cases of food contamination in the manufacturing, restaurant and cruise-ship industries

have brought the topic of food safety to the dinner table, says Vesley, a professor in the division of environmental and occupational health.

He emphasizes the importance of hand washing before eating or preparing food; keeping kitchen tools sanitized; cooking hamburger, poultry, pork, fish and eggs thoroughly; and storing perishable foods properly.

"Keep it hot, keep it cold, or don't keep it," he advises.

But there are two schools of thought on the subject of the zealous washing of fresh fruits and vegetables. One is that ingesting normal nonfood substances can help the body build up immunities to some diseases. The other is that dirt on food can hurt you and you'd better scrub those potatoes with a vengeance.

Bell, the soil science professor, says he doesn't wash his fresh produce particularly ambitiously. "My wife does," he says. "She likes to have it as clean as possible. But I don't. I don't see a problem with it."



Behrend construction unearths a lot of dirt. How much of it will be consumed by humans? We'll never know!

ing in it. Once you remove it from the surface of the Earth, it's dirt. Dirt is what you have under your fingernail."

And on some of your vegetables when you pick them out at the supermarket produce counter.

Unlike soil, which is full of nutrients, dirt no longer supports organic matter so has lost most of its nutritional value. That indicates it's low in calories, if that helps anyone to better accept it as part of the standard American diet. Some mothers have been known to tell their children not to complain about a little dirt on their veggies because dirt has minerals in it. But Bell doubts there's much nutritional value in dirt.

"Whether it's got minerals in it or not, it probably just passes through the human body," he says. "I doubt the minerals are available in a way that's going to do you much good."

Dirt is most likely to cross one's palate when eating root vegetables, especially those with crevices in them, such as potatoes and carrots, food experts say. It's also common in leafy greens, such as lettuce and spinach, which tend to collect blowing soil and retain it when

Through the looking glass

by Mike Pingree, KRT Campus

HMMMM. SHE LOOKS INTERESTING

In an effort to fight prostitution, Oklahoma City officials started a television channel that broadcast the pictures of men caught cavorting with the local ladies of the evening. Public shaming, it was thought, would keep potential clients away.

The plan backfired. Because the hookers' mugshots were also aired, it enabled would-be customers to identify them, facilitating future encounters. "It was almost a promotional thing for them," a spokesman said. "It wasn't a deterrent at all."

WHERE'D ALL THESE COPS COME FROM?

A man in Germany pulled his car over so he could snort cocaine, not realizing that he parked in a space reserved for police cars outside the Innstadt police station. He was arrested.

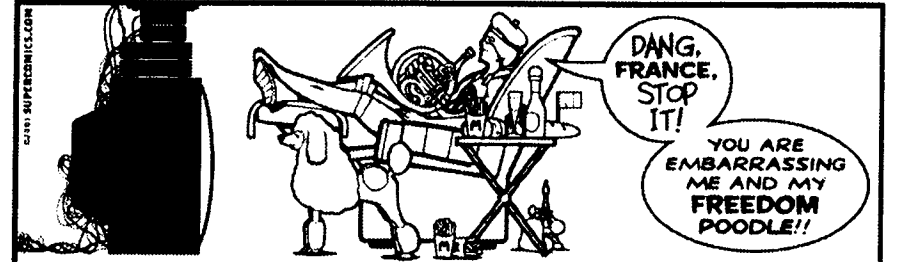
YOU'RE NOT EXACTLY WHAT I PICTURED

An orthodox New York rabbi went on the Internet and arranged a date with a 13-year-old girl named Katie, who he met in a chat room called "I Love Older Men."

"Katie" turned out to be a middle-aged police detective who arrested the rabbi as soon as he arrived for the tryst.

CAPTAIN RIBMAN in Viva La France!

by Sprengelmeyer & Davis



DITHERED TWITS

by Stan Waling

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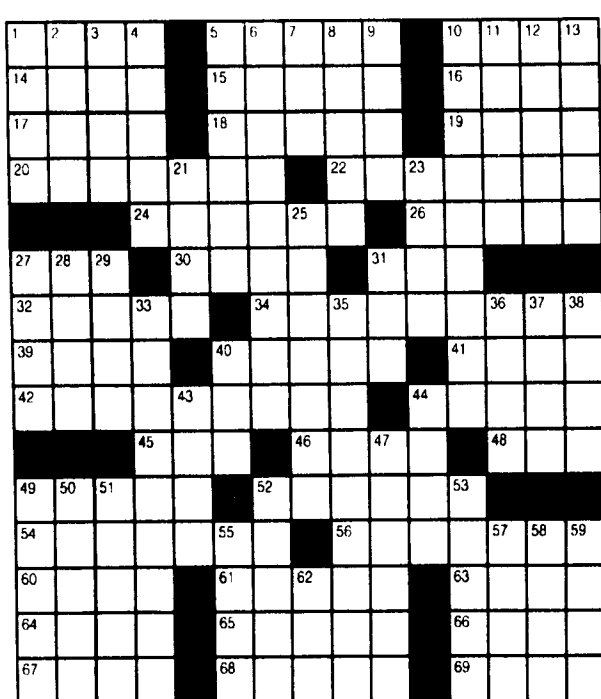
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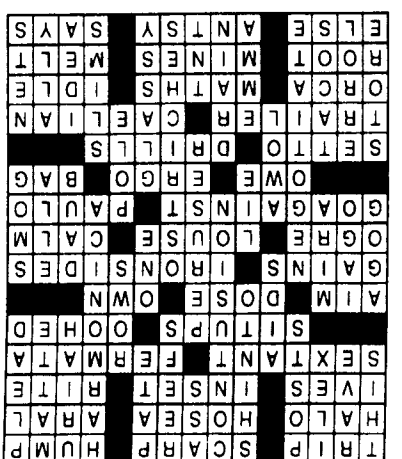
STAN WALING ©2003

Crossword

- ACROSS**
- Stumble
 - Base of a mesa
 - Camelback
 - Crown of light
 - Book before Joel
 - Asian sea
 - Folk singer Burl
 - Webster illustration
 - Religious ceremony
 - Navigational instrument
 - Prolongation of a chord
 - Abdominal exercises
 - Expressed enjoyment
 - Purpose
 - Medication portion
 - Possess
 - Reaps a profit
 - Cromwell's nickname
 - Fairy-tale monster
 - Stinker
 - Peaceful
 - Run counter
 - Sao __, Brazil
 - Be in debt
 - Therefore
 - Sack
 - Brief argument
 - Training routines
 - Film preview
 - One of Rome's seven hills
 - Killer whale
 - English school subj.
 - Inactive
 - Plant anchor
 - Underground excavations
 - Thaw
 - Ultimatum word
 - Fidgety
 - Puts into words
- DOWN**
- The nearer one
 - Glowing review
 - Holm oak
 - Job stations
 - Japanese religion
 - Bruise
 - Buffoon
 - Coral creations
 - Top of the head
 - Dylan's instrument
 - Bathsheba's husband
 - Dull finish
 - Argue a case
 - Lends a hand
 - Propels a shell subj.
 - Close examiner
 - Intensely eager
 - "Othello" conspirator
 - Sorvino of "Mighty Aphrodite"
 - Single unit
 - Try to reach an agreement
 - Flightless birds
 - Dilettante's painting
 - Ms. Fitzgerald
 - Polluted haze
 - Abandon truth
 - MP's quarry
 - Warsaw native
 - Expressionless
 - Put away for a rainy day
 - Flynn of films
 - Tex-Mex order
 - Pool outlet
 - Loses weight
 - Thompson of "Wit"
 - Inkling
 - Comrade
 - Fish catchers
 - T. Turner stn.



Solutions



Do not read this article!

by Crazy Newspaper Face
a not-so-serious contributing writer

You think you have it hard because you're a minority, or a woman? Well, try being me for a day. I'm Crazy Newspaper Face. All I hear about these days is racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and all those other isms. What about anti-newspaperism? Yeah, I know you've never heard of that. You probably think there is no such thing. Well, I'm here to tell you how it is. Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not saying that all those things mentioned above are insignificant. I'm just saying try being a man with a newspaper for a face.

I was born on a cold January morning in New York City. The doctor couldn't even tell my mother whether I was a boy or a girl because he was too busy reading the funnies on page 8A of my face. The next few years of my life weren't all that bad. Yeah, sure, I would occasionally catch my dad staring at my forehead during dinner, but overall it wasn't that bad.

Then the problems began. Some readers probably had nightmares of showing up at school naked, but have you ever had one about having a newspaper for a

face? Try showing up on the first day of first grade with a face that reads, "President Reagan to give State of the Union Address." I was so embarrassed. Then, to top it all off, the teacher tried to pull my face off because she thought it was a joke. I spent the next six years of my life hearing things like, "Hey, let's go read Crazy Newspaper Face Boy's face," and, "What's happening in Iraq today?" And you thought you had it bad.

Puberty was the worst. Most of you got pimples. I got typos. Not only did I have to walk around with a newspaper face, but the words were spelled wrong.

Try dating with my face! "Hi, how are you doing? My name is Crazy Newspaper Face." Do you see my point? When I actually do find someone who can look past my face and see who I really am, I can't even kiss them without smearing today's news all over their lips. I won't even go over what it is like trying to have sex with a face like mine. I've never had a relationship last for



Crazy Newspaper Face poses for a rare photo.

more than three days

Try getting a job. I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up, but all of my teachers said a boy like me could never be one. Then I wanted to be a fireman, but they all said my face would catch fire. The only place I can work is at a newsstand, and even there people ask me if they can read my face because were all out of the New York Times.

So, all I'm trying to say is, before you start complaining about how bad you have it, just think what it would be like if you had a newspaper for a face.

PHOTO BY BECKY WEINDORF/THE BEHREND BEACON