

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

PROCESSED FOODS ARE ENERGY GUZZLERS

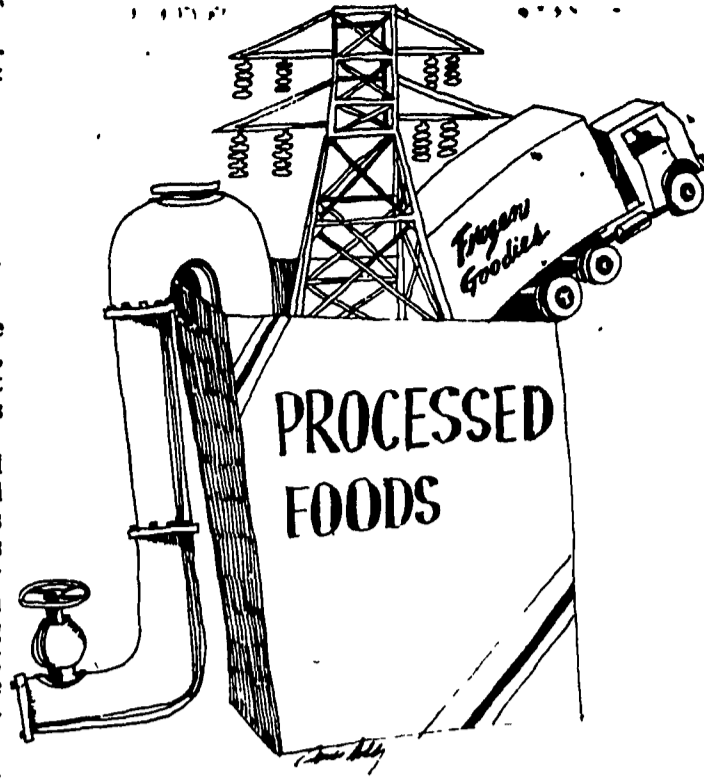
Next time you feel like grumbling about rising prices at the supermarket, consider this: When you buy processed foods, you are paying not only for the food itself, but the energy that is required to process it. And we all know that energy is becoming a more expensive commodity every day.

Few of us realize, however, just what a staggering demand modern food processing places on our reserves of oil, gas and electricity. Conservation expert Eric Hirst, who makes energy studies at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, says U. S. food processing consumed 2,868 trillion BTU's of energy or the equivalent of 51.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity in 1963. That heading includes everything from blanching almonds to manufacturing TV dinners, but the really big energy drain (and hence the highest costs to consumers like yourself) comes in the area of convenience food items — instant soups, frozen desserts, etc.

Here are some of the ways food companies and middlemen put the big bite on our energy and other natural resources, pushing up the price of our food in the process.

- **IN-PLANT PROCESSING.** That includes all the ways natural, fresh-from-the-farm foodstuffs are converted into convenience items, often with the addition of chemical fillers and preservatives. Milling, freezing, freeze-drying, pasteurization, boiling, and steaming all come under this heading, as well as power-driven conveyor belts and other food-plant machinery.

Such processing can run the gamut from something



relatively simple like stripping the nutrient-rich germ from the wheat, to more complex operations such as the manufacture of cake mixes.

- **PACKAGING.** It takes an incredible amount of energy to produce aluminum trays for frozen dinners, plastic wrap for fruits and vegetables, and paper and cardboard to wrap the thousands of items in a large supermarket.

"If the U.S. production of paper for packaging purposes were cut in half, 0.2 billion barrels of oil would be saved each day," says Dr. Priscilla Laws, associate professor of physics at Dickinson College. Of course that includes non-food packaging, but it gives some indication of the price Americans pay for fancy wrappings.

Disposing of waste packaging after food is carried home and eaten also takes energy. Garbage trucks run on gasoline, just like other vehicles.

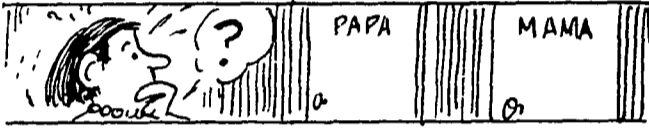
Fast-food franchises also contribute heavily to energy waste through over-packaging of their hamburgers, French fries, soft drinks, etc. One large chain of 1750 restaurants used up the energy equivalent of 12.7 million tons of coal in 1971, reported Bruce M. Hannon, an engineer at the University of Illinois. "That's enough energy to keep the cities of Pittsburgh, Boston, Washington and San Francisco supplied with electric power for the entire year," he added.

- **TRANSPORTATION AND STORAGE.** This includes long-distance trucking to move foods from processing plants to warehouses and retail outlets. Supermarkets and large warehouses have to be heated and illuminated, and refrigeration and freezer equipment runs day and night.

As a consumer, you can do something about this tremendous energy drain (and save yourself some money as well) by selecting your food carefully. "Increased use of unprocessed foods (e.g., fresh potatoes rather than frozen French fries) would save energy because it takes three times as much energy to deliver a physical unit of food from processing than agriculture," says Hirst.

Fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products, flour and cereals are good examples of foods requiring smaller energy inputs, he says.

A widespread shift to natural, unrefined food products grown closer to home would do more than conserve energy. For many families, it would increase the daily intake of vitamins and minerals and provide needed fiber and bulk in the diet.



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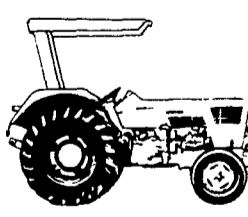
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Energy-conscious shoppers will also find themselves depending less on a handful of giant corporations that now control most areas of food processing.

"If we are caught unaware by the fuel crisis, and if we are chagrined by the lack of competition in the oil industry, then we ought to know the same phenomenon is occurring now in the food industry," warns Jim Hightower, coordinator of the Food Action Campaign. Hightower's group believes the way to break the food processing monopoly is to educate consumers about the evils of "factory farming" and to support small family farmers growing wholesome food.

For concerned food shoppers and home gardeners alike, the message is clear. The further we go into this energy crisis, the more sense it makes to eat as much natural, unprocessed food as we can.

"Make It With Natural Foods" is a 45-page booklet that shows how to convert your own kitchen into a low-energy "food factory." You can get a copy by sending fifty cents to Robert Rodale, Organic Living, in care of this newspaper. Be sure to ask for the booklet by name and allow four weeks for delivery.

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