

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

The Decline of Natural Flavor

Try this simple test. Ask yourself, when was the last time your mouth actually watered at the thought of your next meal? When was your last truly memorable taste experience? If you can't answer, you're probably one of the millions of Americans who have forgotten the thrill of fresh, natural food flavor.

Take fruit, for example. "Coming generations will scarcely know how a good apple tastes," laments Fred Lape, director of the George Landis Arboretum in Esperance, N.Y. Sharpness and variety of flavor are disappearing, he says, because commercial apple producers prefer to breed for color and preservative qualities.

Supermarket shoppers must now settle for the bland, mediocre Delicious apple instead of the increasingly rare Northern Spy. "As a standard of excellence, says Lape, "I would set the Northern Spy as the best apple ever grown in the United States. To bite into the tender flesh of a well-ripened Spy, have its juice ooze around the teeth, its rich tart flavor fill the mouth and its aroma rise up into the nostrils, is one of the outstanding experiences of all fruit eating."

Experiences like that are seldom spoken about

anymore. We've become accustomed to the sameness of processed and artificially-flavored foods, from supermarkets and fast-food franchises. A few people still care about flavor, but they are a minority. Disciples of Euell Gibbons scavenge the countryside for wild food treats, while gourmet food fanciers patronize specialty shops and restaurants. But the trail of good flavor is an elusive one.

The sad part is that many young people grow up believing imitation flavors are the real thing and the real things are the imitators. Consider these examples:

-A major food processor was recently forced to reformulate its natural tomato flavor catsup because consumers preferred the overcooked, scorched flavor of more heavily-processed brands.

-Many people reject as inferior any tomato juice that doesn't have a tinny, metallic flavor from contact with a can. The same prejudice prevails against fresh pineapple juice.

-Food technologists are rushing to perfect artificial cheeses, eggs, milk and tomatoes that will replace natural foods. Imitation orange juice, bacon, peanut butter and chocolate already are being marketed.

Synthetic flavor manufacturers like to boast that they can duplicate any flavor found in nature. "Our chicken is chickenier," brags one company in an ad that promises results that taste "just like grandma's cooking." Of course, few people can actually remember grandma's cooking clearly enough to know what they're missing.

-Incredibly-flavorful and unique natural tastes - vine-ripened tomatoes, dead-ripe persimmons and free-range chickens, to name just a few - have never been savored by many young people, especially in our cities. Bland, uninspiring flavors are all they know.

"If you give someone strawberry ice cream made with fresh strawberries, you'd have a totally unacceptable product," one food industry insider admitted recently.

Part of the flavor problem is that many people have lost the ability to make subtle taste distinctions. Heavy smokers, for example, often can't rely on their own taste buds to bring out all the flavor in food.

A dietary deficiency of zinc, an important trace mineral, robs some adults and children of their sense of taste. In a National Heart and Lung Institute study, Dr. Robert I. Henkin found that a group of undersized children with poor appetites were all suffering from a lack of zinc. He placed the children on a month-long diet containing zinc-rich organ meats and their appetites perked up,



along with their ability to taste and enjoy their meals. Assuming there's nothing wrong with your taste buds that a plateful of real food won't cure, how can you rediscover the joys of flavorful eating?

Start by serving more natural, unprocessed foods in their freshest form. Farmers' markets, roadside stands and home vegetable gardens are the best sources of supply. Stay away from heavily-salted, sugared or artificially-flavored processed foods.

Try baking your own whole-grain bread. You'll be amazed at the hearty flavor, which spongy, white "enriched" bread just can't duplicate.

Seek out fresh fruits and vegetables that are certified organically-grown, without pesticides or artificial fertilizers. "There's no question whatsoever that the flavor is 40, 50, 100 percent better than foods grown other ways," says Roy de Groot, internationally-known gourmand and food editor of Esquire magazine.

"I'm again and again stressing taste the difference," he continues. "Don't try to remember from one day to the next, but buy one kind of tomato and another kind of tomato, buy the ordinary, the mass-produced vegetable and the natural, organic vegetable and taste them side by side. If you do this tasting, there's only one answer. Everywhere, people are realizing how much better natural and organic foods taste."

To savor natural flavors at their purest, serve simple dishes without fancy or complex sauces. If you must have seasoning, try just a hint of herbs. "There is nothing better than an organically-grown tomato with a bit of salt and a tiny sprinkling of basil on it," says de Groot. "There is no finer food in the world."

(Editor's Note: The opinions appearing in "Organic Living" are those of its author, Robert Rodale, an independent columnist. Rodale's comments do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Lancaster Farming editor or anyone else on the Lancaster Farming staff.)

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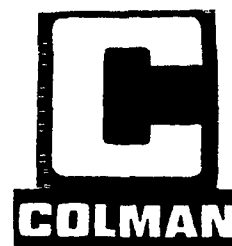
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