

Grocery Store Minefield

Food marketers have set up an obstacle course of islands to lure the shopper and prolong the visit. At some point during the evolution of the supermarket from cramped aisles of canned food to visually enticing displays of fresh produce, going in and just grabbing a couple of items got complicated. The usual trip to the grocery store now requires zigzagging around numerous islands before you can get to the cooler on the back wall, exposing you to a plethora of tempting but unhealthy food along the way. The only way to beat it is to walk straight through, voicing a mantra to make good food choices. "Once you're caught in one of those aisles, good luck getting out," says Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University. "Keeping you in the supermarket for as long as they can is the name of the game," the professor says. It's this game of tug-of-war - a society obsessed with all things healthy versus supermarket consultants relentlessly thinking of fresh ways to grab customer attention - that has Canadians more confused about food than ever, Dr. Nestle explains.

"People want to buy healthy, but with self-sponsored health claims all over the packaging, and the real estate devoted to these foods, they can't tell the difference." Those in the grocery business say there is no misleading going on, with more nutritious and healthy food options available today than ever before.

When Dr. Nestle entered a downtown Toronto supermarket recently, she was surprised by a fresh pizza counter and gelato bar greeting customers by the produce section. "They're performing an extraordinary public service. People are leading busier and busier lives. It's easier than making a meal yourself." But is it really healthy, she wonders. She makes her point a few moments later. A woman is standing behind the bakery counter, eyeing three wads of bread dough on a cart. A sign overhead says that fresh bread is baked there daily.

"You bake fresh bread here?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is the dough made from scratch or does it come frozen?"

"Frozen."

Supermarkets and food manufacturers are going to a lot of trouble to make things look healthier - and fresher - than they really are, Dr. Nestle says, and it's because health sells. She steps into one aisle stacked high with cereal boxes plastered with health claims. "Look at this. The reason it has 24 vitamins in it is because they put them in. You could also just give your kid a vitamin supplement," she says, as she squints to read the health claims on a cereal box aimed at children. The vitamins and the fact that it's made with whole grain would be a plus, she says, if the cereal (which she calls "low-fat cookies") didn't have a high calorie count and so much sugar. "But look - sugar is the second ingredient in this long, long list. At least four different kinds of sugars. Five. Six."

The biggest favour you can do for yourself and your family is to take what Dr. Nestle calls the "route of least resistance," sticking to the periphery of the supermarket where necessities such as fruits, vegetables and milk products are found. "That's the healthiest and quickest way of shopping - staying out of there," she says as she points to the central hub of snack, soda and frozen food aisles.

Other tips Dr. Nestle offers in navigating toward the healthier options include choosing products with shorter ingredient lists, opting for smaller packages even if the price-per-unit is a bit higher, buying local produce because it is fresher than food that has been transported a long distance, and opting for plain yogurt or cereal and adding your own sugar or fruit. But for every one of Dr. Nestle's tips on dodging the less-whole-some snacks, there's a marks consultant thinking of a new i cept to counter the sensible proach.

One of these people is supermarket-design pioneer Don Watt, refashioned Loblaw and A&P stores across the country in the 1970s, is unanimously credited with transforming the Canadian supermarket into a lucrative and stimulating place. Nothing is accidental when it comes to supermarket design, the slow music playing overhead, having the longest aisles possible without agitating the customer said Mr. Watt,

who founded International 39 years ago. But, he admits, supermarkets bending to the public's desire for healthier foods, supplying and featuring organic products, and ensuring that health claims are prominently placed on packaging. "People are starting to read ingredient lists." Putting the fresh produce at the front of the store was his idea, but there was an ulterior motive: Fresh produce yields higher profit margins "Every retailer wants the consumer to be happy with their shop "There's no conspiracy to prevent buyers from getting to the healthy shopping experience Mr. Watt said, adding that "After all, they want you to come back again."

New York University nutrition professor Marion Nestle says the basic principles of good diets can be summed up in 10 words: Eat less, move more, eat lots of fruits and vegetables. Here are some other tips she offers in her book *What to Eat.. An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*:

- Organic. Pesticide-free produce may not look as pretty, but if you want fewer pesticides in your body and in the bodies of your children, buy organic.
- Margarine: No matter what the labels say, all margarines are mixtures of soybean oil and food additives. Opt for some olive oil or a little butter instead.
- Bread: Go for whole-grain bread over white, and find loaves that are 100% whole wheat, listing whole wheat flour as the first ingredient, with at least two grams of fibre per ounce.
- Cereal: Go for the cereals on the top shelves, the unsweetened ones. You can add your own sugar and fruit.
- Juice: The more pulp, the better. Nutrients stick to the fibre in the pulp.
- Sugar: The only difference between brown and white sugar is taste. Nutritionally, they're the same.
- Eggs: Colour of the shells is the only difference between brown and white eggs.
- Meat: Don't be misled by labels. A meat package that states its contents are 80% lean means the meat is actually 20% fat by weight, which makes up more than two thirds of its calories.

Investigate your grocery store.

Where are the sugar cereals?

Where are the junk foods?

Where is the bread?

Where is the milk?