

Flamin' Hot Cheetos are the American dream: I disapprove of what you eat, but I'll defend to the death your right to eat it

Katherine Mangu-Ward

Reason. 47.4 (August-September 2015): p2.

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Full Text:

THE STORY OF Flamin' Hot Cheetos is the story of America. The illegitimate offspring of a cheese puff and a Dorito, the snacks are a triumph of food science. With their finger-staining red pigment, infinite shelf life, sui generis squiggly shape, and well-calibrated esophageal burn, Flamin' Hots flaunt qualities impossible to find in nature, brought into existence by applying advanced technology to frivolous goals.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The creation story of this irresistible snack is quintessentially American, too. Richard Montanez, a longtime janitor at the Frito-Lay plant in Rancho Cucamonga, California, was watching someone cook corn with butter and chile when inspiration struck: Why not add Mexican spices to the famous corn-based puff? Montanez--who spoke no English--whipped up a test batch, designed some mock packaging, and soon found himself convincing the top brass at the \$11 billion subsidiary of Pepsi Co to give his idea a shot. It would go on to become the company's top-selling product line.

But this inspiring tale of culinary innovation has an ending that's all too common in America as well. Flamin' Hot Cheetos--especially popular with teenagers--ran afoul of federal nutrition guidelines for foods sold in schools. The delicious snack was eliminated from vending machines in the gigantic Los Angeles Unified School District, as well as in other schools across the country. Pasadena's Jackson Elementary even confiscated the bright orange bags when kids brought them from home. (See "Food Freedom in 2015," page 46.) This miracle of culinary chemistry became a symbol of unhealthy eating--and a target for food nannies everywhere.

People love to fight over food. Anything human beings can digest comes pre-loaded with cultural, biological, and emotional significance, making it perfect fodder for politicians and other scolds who want to start squabbles. From former New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg's bans on large fountain sodas to the Los Angeles City Council's attempts to zone fast food joints out of low-income neighborhoods, the powerful especially love to dictate the diets of the poor. The results are condescending, with a certain tone-deafness not just to the difficulties of feeding a family on a limited budget, but to cultural differences as well.

As Gustavo Arellano describes in "Drop That Snack!" (page 18), food scolds in Los Angeles are working overtime to take away choices they don't adequately comprehend or appreciate. The targets of their ire make for a varied smorgasbord, from the industrial delights of packaged snack food to the homegrown deliciousness of queso cheese and small-batch chorizo sausage.



The snooty are far from immune, as demonstrated by crackdowns on raw milk, superchef Alice Waters' beloved Point Reyes oysters ("Oysters vs. the State," page 66), and wine aged at the bottom of Charleston Harbor ("Illegal Underwater Wine," page 80).

Want to grow your own organic produce on your own land for your own consumption? Too bad, hipster. If you live in Miami Shores Village, Florida, or Ferguson, Missouri, the authorities might make you tear your zucchini and berries out of the ground with threats of daily fines or even imprisonment ("Turf War," page 26).

Still, political skirmishes over snacks shouldn't distract us from the amazing variety on our dinner plates these days. Science-fiction author Arthur C. Clarke's third law states that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Jack's fast-growing beanstalk, Snow White's shiny apple, even Cinderella's pumpkin coach are magical manifestations of humanity's abiding obsession with flawless, abundant produce.

Yet when technological advances make those fictional fruits into a reality--dozens of apples perfect enough to tempt any girl with poison at every American grocery store--somehow we do not celebrate. We should. On average, Americans now spend less than 10 percent of their income on food, compared with 40 percent 100 years ago and closer to 30 percent just 50 years ago.

And even the cheapest food is far more delicious than it used to be. There are important packaged snack innovations, of course. But fresh food is constantly being freighted and flown (flown!) around the world to become the staples of the American diet: asparagus in mid-winter, fresh salmon 1,000 miles from the nearest ocean, strawberries the size of a baby's fist.

Let's not forget those cream-filled cakes that can wait patiently in your cupboard for a year, sliced meats that stay fresh in vacuum-sealed packages for weeks, and grains that are too cheap to meter. The prospect of such a diet would seem like a fairy story to most eaters even a few decades ago, and it still does in much of the world.

Newt Gingrich likes to tell a story of one of the highest-profile Cold War defections. A Soviet official, under heavy guard, is being ferried from his hotel to the United Nations building when he looks out the window of his car and sees a sidewalk produce stand. The sight of the glistening fruit and vegetables sitting on the street--and no one with a gun anywhere in sight to protect the amazing bounty--convinces him that America is a place of such prosperity, domestic peace, and power that it will certainly triumph in any conflict with hungry, angry Russia. He was right.

With copiousness comes corpulence. The waistlines of Americans--especially poor Americans--often serve as politicians' excuse to meddle with our meals. But legislative and bureaucratic solutions nearly always lag or duplicate existing commercial slimming solutions. If you think government is likely to stumble on the right diet advice, just check out "70 Years of Dubious Federal Food Rules" (page 11).

Where elites once dreamed of unblemished abundance, we now fetishize the flawed, the limited, and the local. Today, there are many who find scalability suspect--alarm bells ring at the prospect that something can be mass produced, shipped in bulk, or stored for long periods. Eaters demand to know the geographical and genetic origins of their apples, even if they aren't being brandished by a suspicious-looking old witch.

The idea of eschewing watermelon in all but the last weeks of summer seems questionable, while skipping the carefully bred seedless varieties in favor of the classic seeded option is clearly downright insane. And New Zealand lamb, shipped over on a slow boat with a low-carbon footprint, is one of life's great delights. But if you want to eat local or eschew the bacteria-destroying power of pasteurization, you're in luck, because there are hundreds of companies out there who want to cater to you. I fail to understand why anyone would want to eliminate genetically modified organisms from their diets, since there is no scientific backing for such a decision (page 16). But enjoy your Chipotle, Luddites! My limit for Flamin' Hot Cheetos is probably one bag per year, but if you want to eat a McDonald's sausage burrito every morning, as columnist Veronique de Rugy does (page 14), carry on!

I may turn up my nose at your raw milk and seriously consider a boycott of Chipotle for catering to anti-science nonsense (if only the guacamole weren't so good!) but luckily, I don't have to like what you're having for dinner.

Politicians will never be able to resist the siren song of food nannyism, and their meddling will certainly cause inconvenience. But even those Flamin' Hot Cheetos have made their way back into schools, slightly reformulated and repackaged to thwart the politicians' intent. As Iron Chef's Geoffrey Zakarian tells *Reason's* Nick Gillespie on page 38, Americans make great food because "we have the ability here to go into business, go out of business, make mistakes, get back up, and just make it happen. Sometimes we fail marvelously, but failure is part of winning." Never mind the nannies--tastiness will triumph in the end.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Mangu-Ward, Katherine. "Flamin' Hot Cheetos are the American dream: I disapprove of what you eat, but I'll defend to the death your right to eat it." *Reason*, Aug.-Sept. 2015, p. 2+. *General OneFile*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&sw=w&u=s1185784&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA421581547&it=r&asid=7a733898ca4ba24cfab6031d0423ea46. Accessed 14 Mar. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A421581547

6.1 | Obesity prevalence in U.S. 12- to 19-year-olds, percent 1971–1974

10.5 | Obesity prevalence in U.S. 12- to 19-year-olds, percent 1988–1994

18.1 | Obesity prevalence in U.S. 12- to 19-year-olds, percent 2007–2008

Bad stress tied to inflammation

Negative interactions may have biological effects

By Nathan Seppa

Competing in vain for the attention of someone special or fretting over a midterm exam may not be healthy. Such stress seems to boost a person's supply of two proteins that cause inflammation, researchers report online January 23 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

These inflammatory triggers have been linked to an increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and depression. The new results add to a growing body of research that links social stress with biological risks.

"We wanted to see how mental states such as optimism, or social relationships such as competition, get under the skin," says study coauthor Shelley Taylor, a social neuroscientist at the UCLA School of Medicine. She and her colleagues looked at the relationship between day-to-day stress and two proteins called proinflammatory cytokines that trigger inflammation in the body.

The researchers asked 122 young, healthy adults to keep a diary of all positive and negative social interactions for eight days, as well as descriptions of any incidents that involved competition. "We picked young adults with no history of heart disease or inflammation disorders or depression [because] we wanted to look at the biological processes in a population that was healthy," Taylor says.

Several days later, the scientists collected fluid samples from the volunteers' inner cheeks. Analyses revealed that the people with the most negative social interactions recorded in their diaries, and those who reported stressful competition in work or academic pursuits, had

substantially higher levels of one of the inflammatory proteins—TNF receptor 2—than did those who recorded fewer such incidents. People reporting stressful competition for another's attention had high concentrations of the other inflammatory protein, interleukin-6.

The volunteers then underwent a stressful test in which they did arithmetic calculations in their heads and gave a brief speech in front of strangers. After this test, people who had had the most negative interactions earlier in the week again showed high levels of both inflammatory proteins.

Obesity not fed by snacks in school

Sales of junk food not tied to weight gain in national study

By Bruce Bower

Sales of candy, soda and other junk food in middle schools don't weigh heavily on students' waistlines. This surprising finding—based on research that followed almost 20,000 kids through middle school—suggests that obesity prevention programs should target children in their homes and communities during the preschool years, when eating habits form, the study's authors say.

Boys and girls, kids from rich families and poor ones, and students of different races displayed no greater tendency to get heavier or to become obese in middle schools stocked with sugary and fatty goodies, as opposed to schools free of junk food, sociologists Jennifer Van Hook and Claire Altman of Pennsylvania State University in University Park report in the January *Sociology of Education*.

The researchers analyzed height and weight data for a nationally representative sample of 19,450 children who were fifth-graders in 2003 and 2004 and eighth-graders in 2006 and 2007, attending both grades in the same county. School principals provided

The link between short-term stress and revved-up inflammation could have an evolutionary basis, suggests Nicolas Rohleder, a psychologist at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., who wasn't part of the study team. "As early humans, we had to fight for our lives—fight or flight," he says. Inflammation has a useful short-term role in fending off pathogens, so triggering inflammation as a response to stress may have been a way for the body to fend off infections caused by those encounters, which often resulted in some form of injury, he says.

information about foods available for purchase at their schools.

But principals usually don't know what foods are available in their own schools' vending machines and lunch lines, raising doubts about the new study's accuracy, says nutrition scientist Mary Story of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Van Hook and Altman lacked "absolutely essential" data on individual kids' eating habits at school, which would directly show whether junk food availability led to weight gains, Story adds.

A national study conducted in 2004 and 2005 linked junk food sold in vending machines in or near school lunch areas with increased student body weight, Story says. She estimates that 40 percent of elementary and secondary school students in that study obtained enough daily calories, on average, from food other than school lunches to gain weight.

About 59 percent of fifth-graders and 86 percent of eighth-graders in the new analysis attended schools that sold junk food. Yet the percentage of overweight or obese students in the study decreased slightly from fifth to eighth grade, from about 39 percent to 35 percent.

Ontario High School
The dangers of Hot Cheetos
THRASHERSAF
FEBRUARY 11, 2016

Flamin' Hot Cheetos have become a popular snack, but what are the dangers of consuming excessive amounts of this delicious snack?

The red chili powder in Cheetos does more than just leave your fingertips smothered in red-orange residue. When unreasonable quantities are ingested, the powder acts as a dye causing feces to be discolored. When this occurs, unaware consumers or doctors may confuse it for bleeding in the lower intestinal tract, including the large intestine or rectum. Though you may not actually be bleeding you will still feel pain when the feces (most likely diarrhea) is released: the powder is still active and will give your anus a "flamin'" sensation.

Additionally, the snack will cause acute gastritis- when the lining of the stomach becomes inflamed or swollen for a short time. Symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, and a burning ache or pain in your upper abdomen.

According to MayoClinic.org, in some cases, gastritis can lead to ulcers and an increased risk of stomach cancer. However, for most people, gastritis is not serious and improves quickly with treatment.

In order to prevent harm from Flamin' Hot Cheetos, you must only eat reasonable amounts and should avoid eating this snack on a regular basis.

Schools ban Flamin' Hot Cheetos

UPI NewsTrack. (Oct. 12, 2012):

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Full Text:

CHICAGO, Oct. 12 (UPI) -- Schools across the United States are banning Flamin' Hot Cheetos out of concern for the popular snack food's lack of nutrition.

The Noble Street Charter School Network in Chicago and the Rockford, Ill., school district said they have banned the snacks, which were created 20 years ago by the Frito-Lay company, due to the high content of salt, fats and artificial coloring with very little fiber or other nutritional benefits, the Chicago Tribune reported Friday.

Renita Weiskircher, director of nutrition services for Rockford Public Schools, said the district used to sell about 150,000 bags of Flamin' Hot Cheetos each school year, but students "have learned to adjust" since the ban was imposed in 2010.

Rita Exposito, principal of Jackson Elementary School in Pasadena, Calif., said faculty members at her school specifically target the snacks.

"We don't allow candy, and we don't allow Hot Cheetos," she said. "We don't encourage other chips, but if we see Hot Cheetos, we confiscate them, sometimes after the child has already eaten most of them. It's mostly about the lack of nutrition."

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"Schools ban Flamin' Hot Cheetos." *UPI NewsTrack*, 12 Oct. 2012. *Business Collection*,
go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?

[p=ITBC&sw=w&u=s1185784&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA305149204&it=r&asid=c9dd32833977a19a9ce31873a21dc32d](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=ITBC&sw=w&u=s1185784&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA305149204&it=r&asid=c9dd32833977a19a9ce31873a21dc32d).
Accessed 14 Mar. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A305149204

Flamin' Hot Cheetos
Staff

Wired. 24.3 (Mar. 2016): p36.

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Full Text:

Byline: SHARA TONN THE VOORHES

FLAMIN' HOT CHEETOS

EXTRUDED PUFFS; SECRET STUFF

Enriched Cornmeal

To make a crunchy puff, food producers like Frito-Lay pour a cornmeal mush into an extruder, a machine that can reach more than 350 degrees Fahrenheit. A metal screw twists the cornmeal into dough and pushes it toward a tiny opening. The dough cooks in the extruder, and as it's forced through the exit, moisture escapes in a flash of steam and the stuff expands into a puff.

Maltodextrin

The ghost of the food world, maltodextrin is a tasteless white powder found in most dry flavored snacks. And in artificial sweeteners. You can't get away from it. Commonly made from corn, maltodextrin is used in the seasoning mix to dilute and evenly distribute flavors and colors. It's water-soluble, so it dissolves as soon as it hits your tongue, releasing the seasoning molecules and ensuring a flavor bomb in each bite.

Cheddar Cheese

The taste foundation for Cheetos. During the cheese-aging process, milk fats and proteins break down into smaller fatty- and amino-acid fragments. The fatty acids lend a cheesy flavor, and the amino acids provide a brothy, savory sensation. For snacks-and boxed mac and cheese-a slurry of cheese, milk solids, and salt is dried into a powder that screams "Cheddar!"

Natural Flavor

Federal law allows companies to cloak ingredients as "natural flavors" so rivals don't rip off their recipes. A natural flavor must be a concentrate of an edible, naturally occurring substance, and manufacturers typically use only a teensy bit in their products-as low as 0.1 percent by volume. So it packs a devastating punch. Here, the flavor is likely a powder concentrate of chili pepper, because none of the other ingredients-even the one called Flamin' Hot Seasoning-contains anything spicy. It's fortunate that maltodextrin is here for even distribution: If you were to ingest a dense nugget of pure hot "natural flavor," your mouth would never forgive you.

Red 40 Lake and Yellow 6 Lake

Without red and yellow dyes, these Cheetos would probably resemble whitish worms-not a look that signals hot and cheesy to your brain. Normal Red 40 and Yellow 6 dyes are water-soluble. By adding aluminum hydroxide-commonly used as an antacid-they become oil-dispersible and get the denotation "Lake." These dyes are mixed with the other powdered ingredients and combined with vegetable oil, which makes the coating stick to the Cheetos-and then to your fingers and everything you touch.

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Staff. "Flamin' Hot Cheetos." *Wired*, Mar. 2016, p. 36. *General OneFile*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?

[p=iTOF&sw=w&u=s1185784&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA444135775&it=r&asid=a60e11f771582544d0403dabc123f362](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?).

Accessed 14 Mar. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A444135775