

Healthy Farmer

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Trends in America's Eating Habits

Spring is (finally) arriving in the U.S. and with it farmers are getting ready to plant, kids are spending more time outside and many people are looking forward to fresh fruits and vegetables in the coming months.

Many people do change their eating habits through the spring and summer as they grow gardens and purchase produce from local farmers' markets. But what has been the overall trend for America's eating habits? A recent article by United State's Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) called, "Guess Who's Turning 100? Tracking a Century of American Eating"¹ looks at the only time-series data on U.S. food availability.

The USDA first published food availability data in 1941 as a part of assessing the U.S. readiness for World War II. The USDA then compiled data beginning in 1909. The USDA began measuring the per capita availability of 53 commodities beginning in 1961.

The ERS collects data from producers and distributors or estimates from government agencies who use sampling and statistical methods. The article says that the availability data typically overstate consumption data because they do not account for spoilage and waste.

The article and data, however, are helpful for viewing availability trends over time and in relation to "outside" forces such as health scares, new technologies and family and societal changes.

The authors of the article cite the availability of potatoes, sweet potatoes, and flour and cereal products as an example of the impact of rising incomes and trade. During the first half of the 1900s, there was a decline in the availability of these products. For instance, the availability of potatoes and sweet potatoes fell from 213.2 pounds per person in 1909 to 114.4 pounds per person in 1959. The authors attribute this decline, in part, to wage improvement which allowed many households to afford more fresh produce.

Flour and cereal availability grew in the second half of the century. The article states that between 1972 and 2008, per capita availability of flour and cereal products increased from 133 pounds per person to 196.5 pounds per person. The authors note that this more recent growth is likely a result of strong consumer demand for a variety of breads, grain-based snack foods and other bakery items.



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The article's authors look at the trends in milk availability as an example of the impact of health information on food choices. Milk availability grew from an annual average of 31.3 gallons per person in the 1910s to 39.2 gallons in the 1940s. The article notes that in 1918, a Yale University nutritionist, Elmer McCollum, called milk a "protective" food because it contained vitamins essential for healthy growth. When Harry Truman, in 1946, signed the National School Lunch Act, this helped to keep up the demand for milk in schools. More recently, however, milk availability has declined from 44.7 gallons per person in 1945 to 20.8 gallons in 2008. This decline is partially due to the competition from sodas and bottled water.

The article considers that societal shifts in gender role expectations contributed to the increased availability of processed eggs, canned, frozen and other processed fruit in 1959 as compared to 1910. The authors note that, while early in the century women were expected to provide the meals for a household, in the 1920s there was an increase in the leisure activity options (such as bridge parties and automobile rides) that were available for couples, so women spent more time in recreational activities with their husbands. Of course, that trend continued into later decades as more women entered the work force. In 1910, 25 percent of women were employed outside the home. In 1960, that number had increased to 35 percent.

The article concludes with a discussion of next-steps by the ERS. The agency began developing a second data series in the 1990s that adjusts for food spoilage and loss at three levels: from farm to retail; at retail level; and at the consumer level. Researchers are currently involved in documenting food loss assumptions.

It is important to pay attention to these national trends and to understand what they may say about individual eating habits. Eating balanced diets contributes to a healthy lifestyle that can counteract myriad health issues. So plant those gardens!

¹ Mentzer Morrison, Rosanna, Buzby Jean, C. and Wells, Hodan Farah. Guess Who's Turning 100? Tracking a Century of American Eating. *Amber Waves*. 3/29/10.
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/amberwaves/march10/features/TrackingACentury.htm>



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