The Psychology of Food Choices

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How Do We Decide What Foods to Eat?

Food is Different

You Are What you Eat

- We literally (and figuratively) internalize the perceived risks and benefits related to food and drink.

We Reinforce This Idea

https://www.mla.com.au/marketing-beef-and-lamb/

We Use Food to Make Ourselves Feel Better

- Physically

We Use Food to Make Ourselves Feel Better

- Emotionally

You Are What you Eat

- Because we internalize them, potential food hazards are often seen as objects of *disgust.*

One Man's Meat

- Yet, what's considered a delicacy in one culture can be an object of disgust in another.

Emerging Food Trends Depend on Evolving Social Norms

What Others Eat/Endorse Influences What We Are Willing to Try

Food Carries Emotional Meaning

- Sharing food with others is
  - Symbolically, psychologically, and emotionally linked with love, nurturing and intimacy.
  - Considered crucial to creating and maintaining bonds between people.

- The adulteration of food and drink is seen as a violation of the trust and bonds between people.

Food Carries Symbolic Meaning

- Some foods have more than nutritional value, they have symbolic value

![Rutgers logo]

Food Can Trigger Memories

- Proust's Madeline.
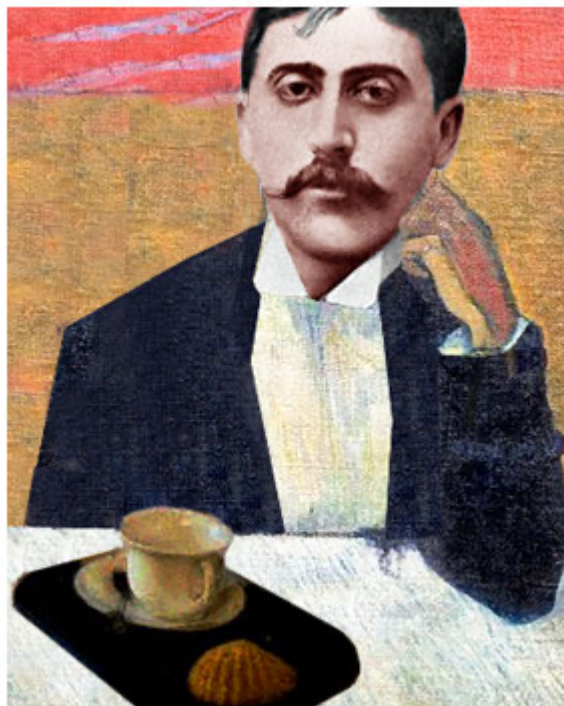
"And suddenly the memory revealed itself: The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray . . . my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane."

Food Carries Cultural Meaning

- Food carries distinct religious, symbolic, and cultural meanings that sets it apart.
  - Feasting, fasting, and the ritual preparation and consumption of certain foods
  - Taboos or restrictions regarding eating or touching of others
  - Each play crucial roles in religious and cultural practices and identities.
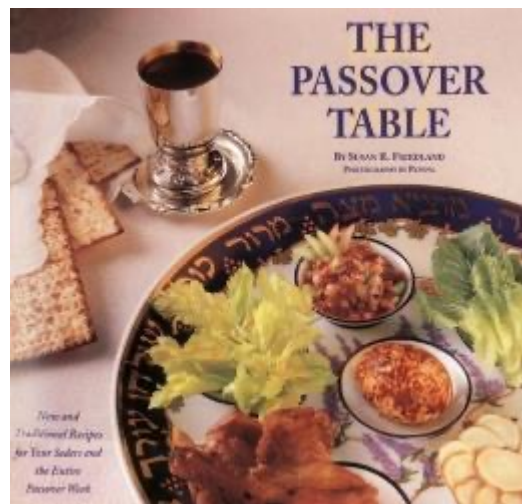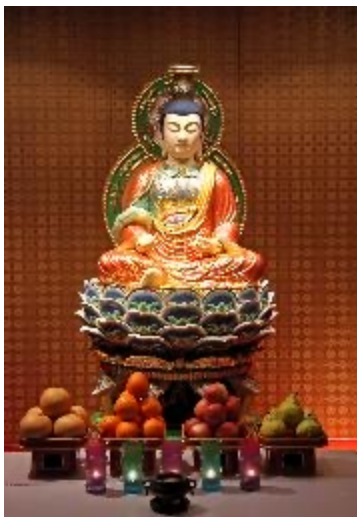
Food Choices Signify Identity

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  - Who they are as individuals
  - Their political or ideological beliefs
  - Their roles and status in society

Food Choices Can Signify Group Solidarity

- People often use their food (and drink) choices demonstrate that they are part of the group

Even if it means we Sometimes Consume Things We Don't Like

- From the original label:

"Most first-time drinkers of Jeppsons Malört reject our alcohol. Its strong, pungent taste is not for everyone. Our schnapps is robust and relentless (even brutal) on the palate … we have found that only 1 in 49 men will drink Jeppsons Malört after the first "shock glass.""

"Malört" is the Swedish word for wormwood, the main ingredient in this terrible spirit. Wormwood is a notoriously bitter herb known for its ability to kill stomach worms and other parasites. Swedes began infusing it with alcohol and using it as a medicine for digestive problems in the 15th century . . ."

WEEDING OUT CHICAGO'S WEAK SINCE 1934.

https://absolutegeneralnews.com/jeppsons-malort-most-likely-the-worlds-worst-tasting-liquor/

Identity Politics

- You can't call yourself a . . .
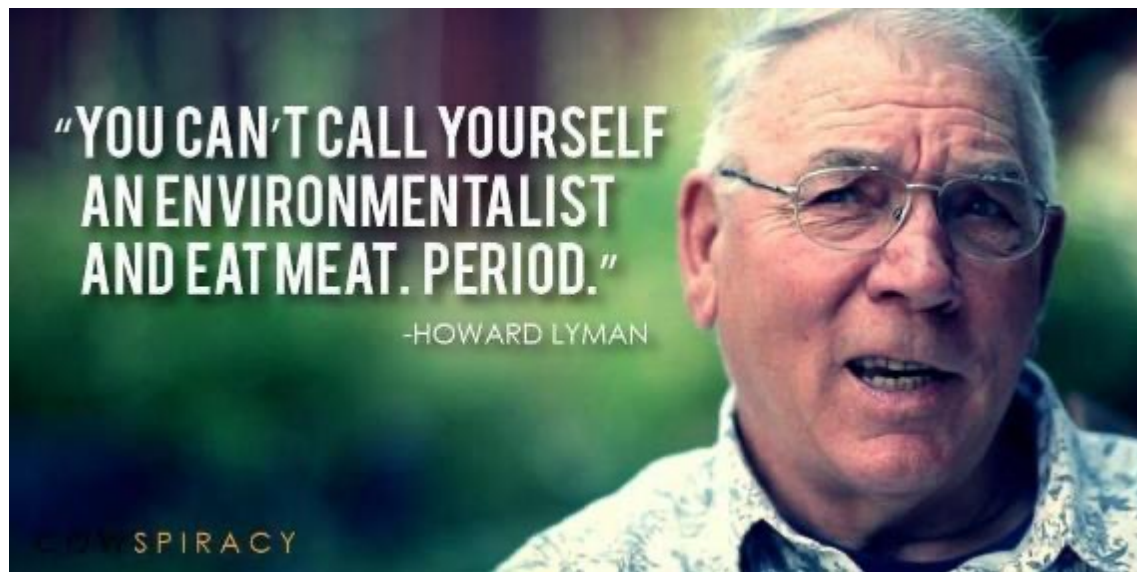
Helpful Friends and Family

Our Food Choices are Driven by both Cognition and Affect

Cognition and Affect (Thinking and Feeling)

- Many psychologists (and especially economists) believe that affect (emotion) is the byproduct of cognition.
    - People evaluate the information they are given, which leads to an overall affective reaction

Affect Can Come First

- Affect can also drive future cognition.

Some Food Choices are Driven by a Cognitive
Focus on Nutrition

Food Is Fuel

Nutrition Apps
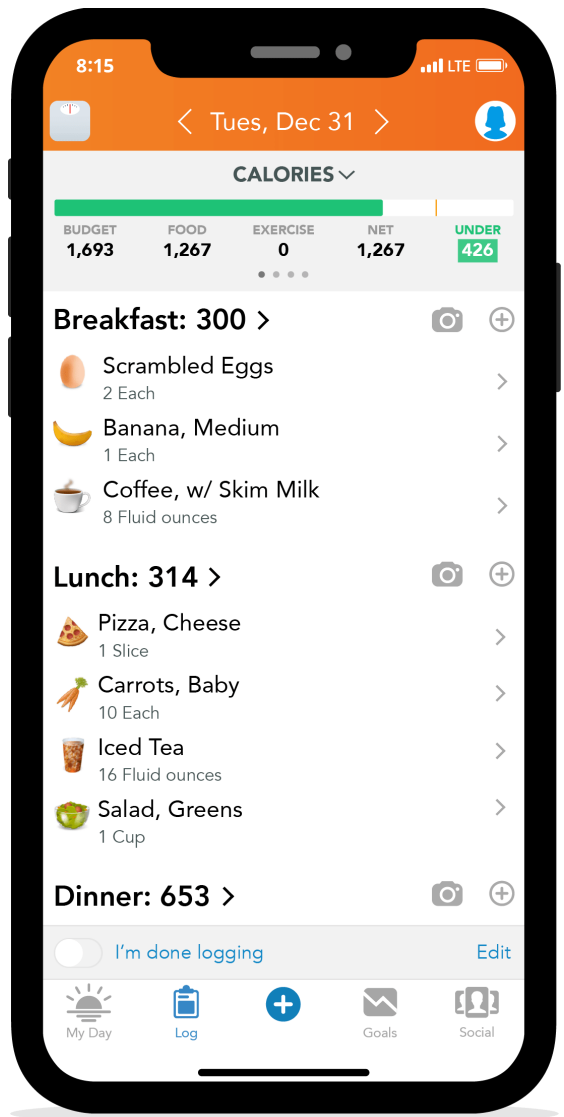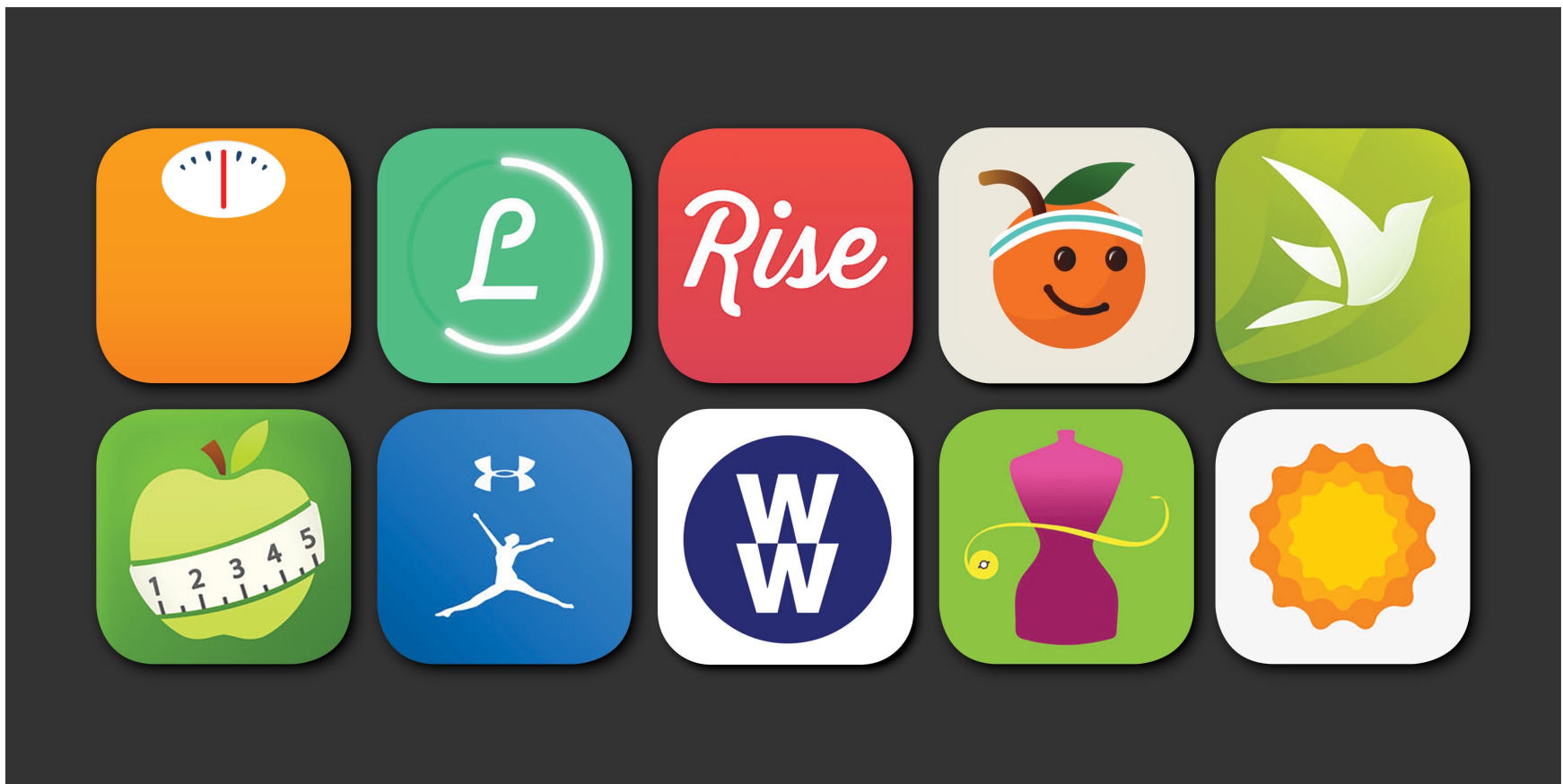
Most Food Choices are Driven by Hedonics

Hedonics

- Hedonics are experiences of pleasure and displeasure
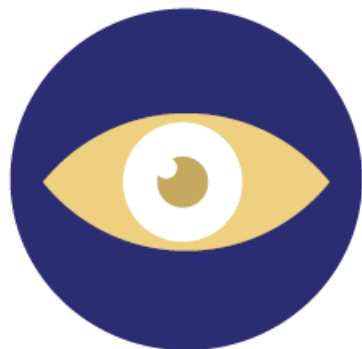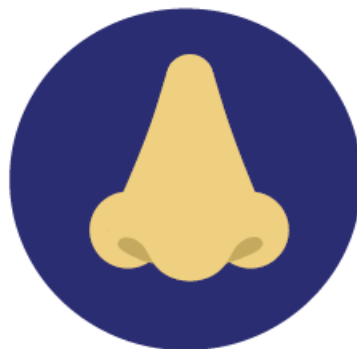
Visual aspect   Olfaction   Taste   Texture

https://www.taste-institute.com/en/resources/blog/4-key-elements-that-make-product-tasty

Our Past Hedonic Experiences Guide Our Future Expectations

We Anticipate Pleasure by Observing Others
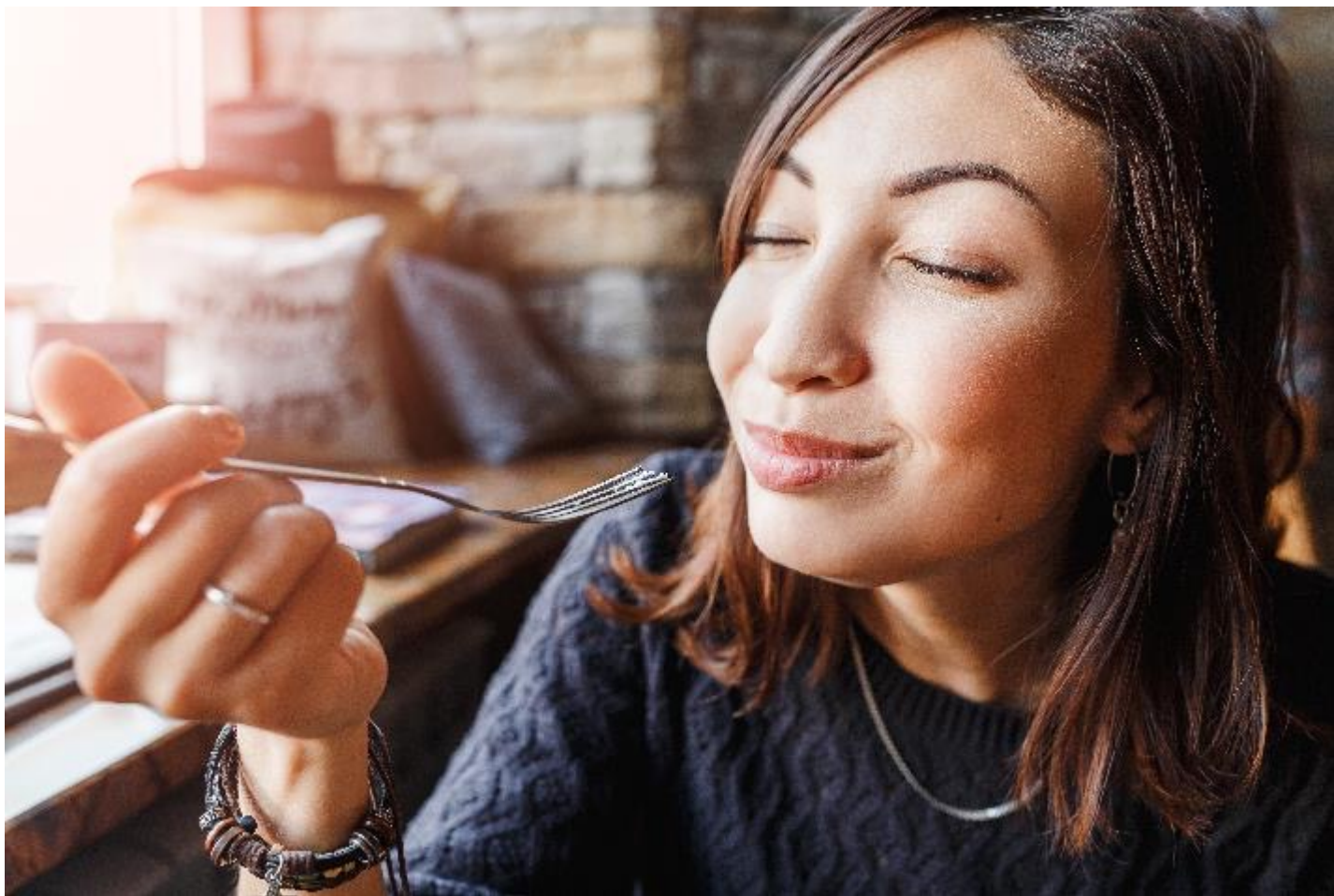
We Anticipate What Will Not be Pleasurable by Observing Others

We Anticipate What Will Not be Pleasurable by Observing Others

We Don't Always Know What We Like

- Malcolm Gladwell worked for Nescafé

- When asked what kind of coffee they like, most Americans will say: "a dark, rich, hearty roast".

- But actually, only 25-27% want that.
  - Most prefer weak, milky coffee.

- "Judgement is clouded by aspiration, peer pressure and marketing messages"

The Problem of Invisibility

Most of the Foodborne Contaminants of Concern Are Invisible

Bacteria

Viruses

Parasites

Toxic Chemicals

Allergens

E coli

Salmonella

Norovirus
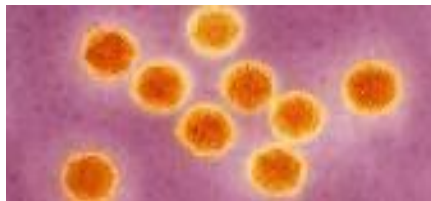
Hepatitis A

Trichinella spiralis
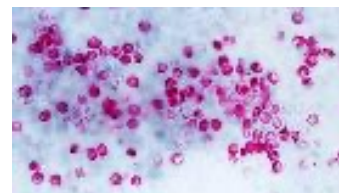
Cryptosporidium parvum
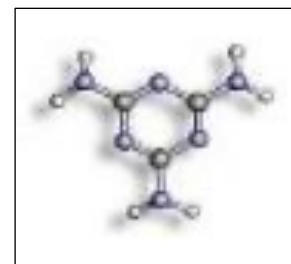
Melamine

Malachite Green

Peanut Ara h 1

Shrimp Tropomyosin
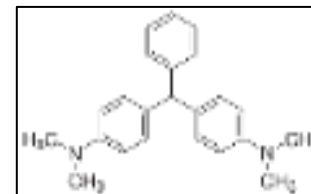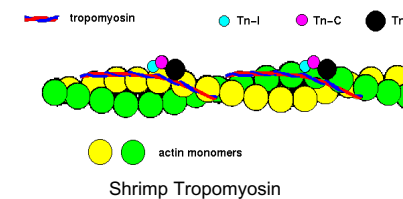
Most of the Foodborne Benefits We Desire Are Invisible

Micronutrients

Macronutrients

Taste

Sustainability, Ethics & Values

Vitamins/Minerals

Calories

Culture, Tradition, Joy, Nostalgia

Implications of Invisibility

- We need to rely on other trusted information to make the invisible visible.

  - Ingredient Labels

  - Health Claims

  - Date Coding

  - Proxy Visual Information

  - Taste & Smell

  - Heuristics/Rules

Problem of Invisibility for Food Safety

- We rely on other visual and olfactory cues to know what is safe and what is not.
    - Many believe that if it looks "clean" there are no bacteria.
    - Spoilage bacteria (responsible for bad tastes and odors) are not a reliable indicator of Pathogenic Bacteria (responsible for foodborne illness)
        - The "sniff-test" is inadequate.
- Without those cues, it is easy for people to either ignore or to amplify the real risks.

We Try to Maintain the Illusion of Control Through a Variety of Means

We Depend on Proxies to Communicate "Credence Attributes"

- Brand
- Familiarity
- Visual Cues

Color as an Attribute

- People use color to identify certain foods

Color as an Attribute

- People use color to identify the ripeness of foods

Color as an Attribute

- People use color to identify the quality/safety of foods

Color as an Attribute

- People use color to identify how cooked foods are
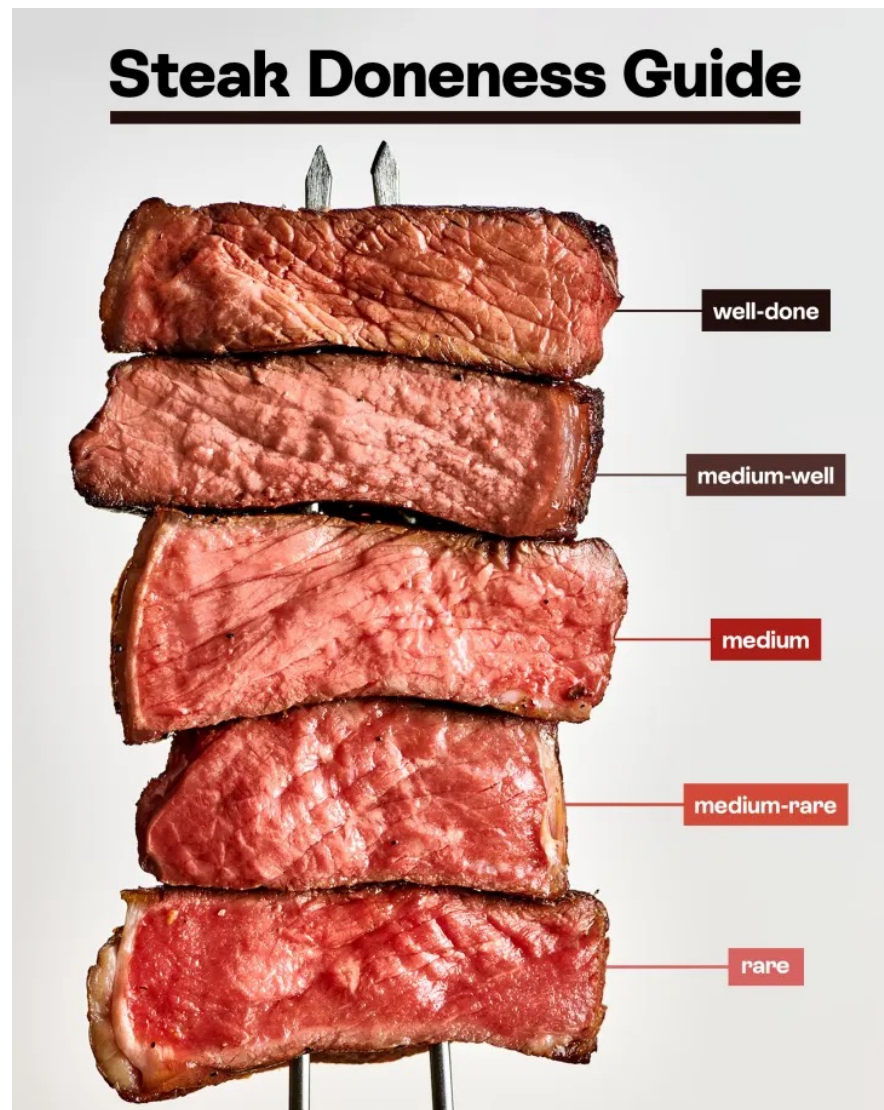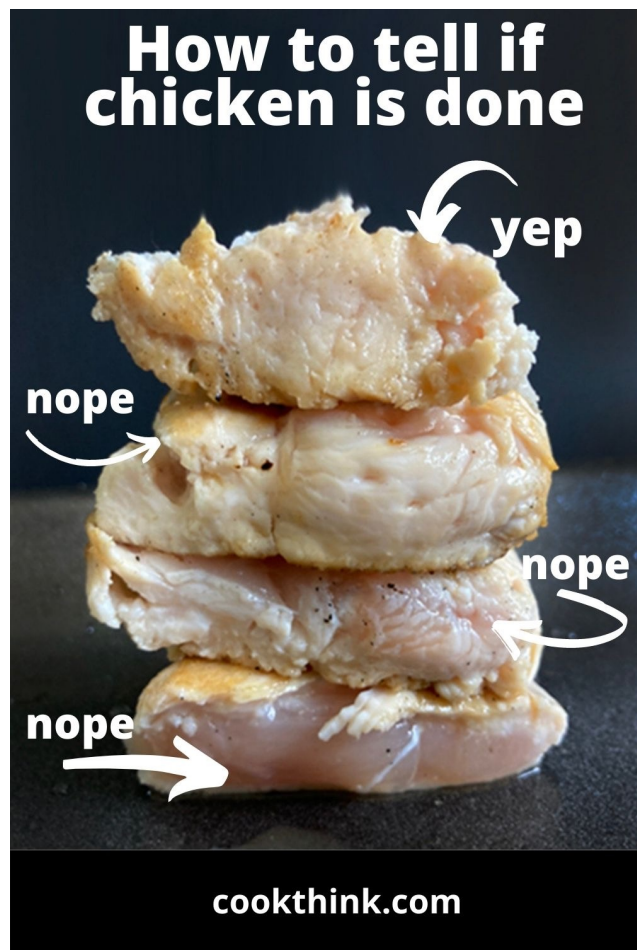
Color as an Attribute

- Color of food is used to anticipate the taste of foods

Color as an Attribute

- Color/flavor associations become conditioned

Color as an Attribute

- Colors incongruent with pre-conditioned expectations can be problematic

Other Proxies

- "Homemade" vs. Commercial
- "Handmade" vs. by Machine

Other Proxies – Choosing Wine

- Price
- Country/Region of Origin
- Color of wine
- Bottle Artwork

The Messages Can be Complex

Communicating Risks and Benefits

- Often involves communicating about both risks and benefits associated with particular food choices.

Many People Find Making the
"Right" Food Choices is Difficult

Whipsaw Effect in Nutrition Research

CNN health Food Fitness Wellness Parenting Vital Signs • LIVE TV Ed

LIVE
- Analysis of Day 3 of Trump's second impeachment trial
- Biden visits National Institutes of Health

Are eggs good or bad for you? The truth may be somewhere in between

By Sandee LaMotte, CNN
Updated 2:00 PM ET, Tue February 9, 2021

Photos: The top egg dishes around the globe

Many Rely on "Food Rules"

People are Open to Simple Heuristics that Capture Gist

- "Eat Organic"

- "Whole foods are best"

- "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."
  - Michael Pollan
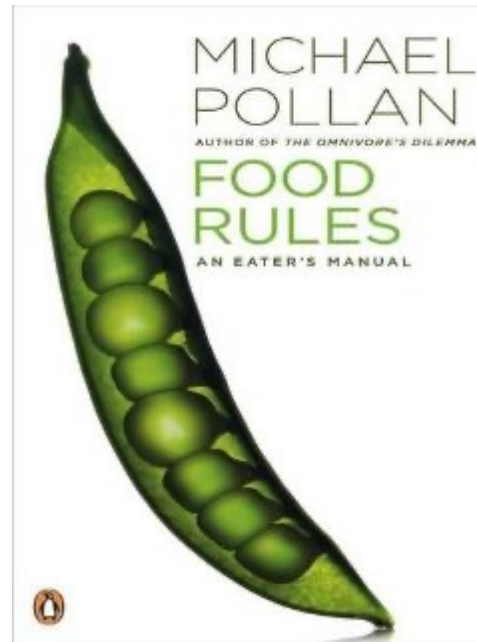
"Rules" Depend on *Intuitive* Plausibility

Pollan, M. (2009). *Food rules: An eater's manual*. Penguin.

Nutrient Content as a Heuristic

Organic, Natural, and Organic as a Heuristic

Get Real

Accept no substitutes -

Clean Label as a Heuristic

GOCLEANLABEL™

WHAT IS "CLEAN LABEL"?

"Clean label is a consumer driven movement, demanding a return to 'real food' and transparency through authenticity. Food products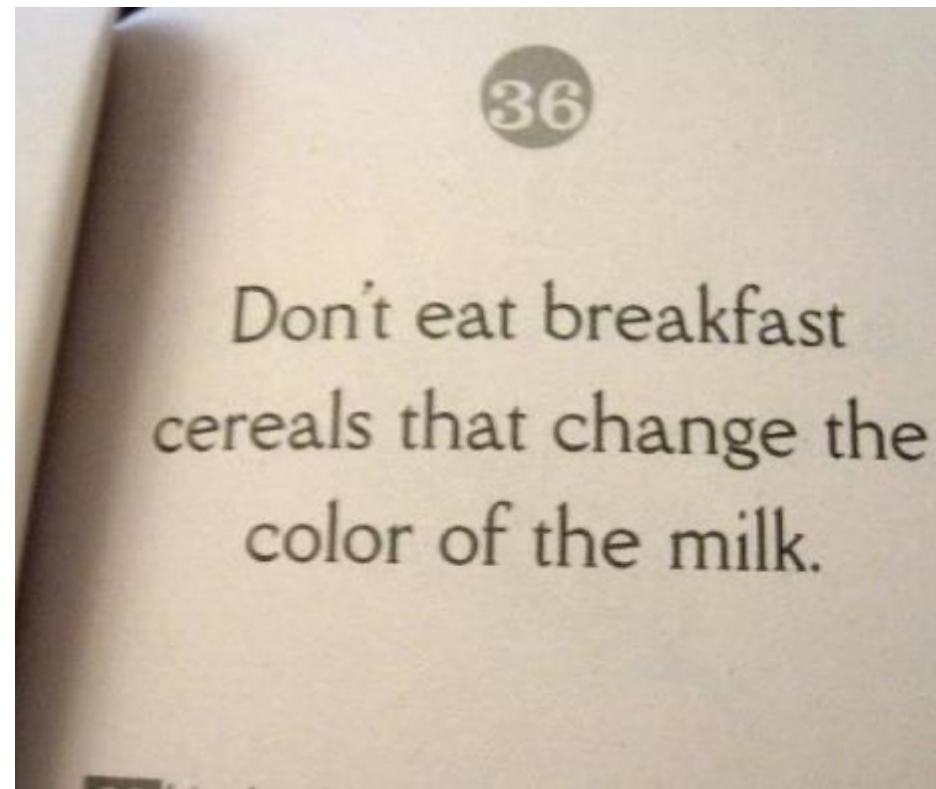 containing natural, familiar, simple ingredients that are easy to recognize, understand, and pronounce. No artificial ingredients or synthetic chemicals." — *Go Clean Label™*

Non-GMO as a Heuristic

People Learn About Many Food "Risks"
Through Implicit Comparisons

What is "Free" is Best

- Pesticide Free
- Antibiotic Free
- Cage Free
- Slave Free
- Clone Free
- Cruelty Free
- Lactose Free
- Gluten Free
- MSG Free
- Salt Free
- Sugar Free
- Caffeine Free
- Fat Free
- Cholesterol Free
- Soy Free
- Dairy Free
- Wheat Free
- BPA Free
- No Artificial Colors
- No Artificial Flavors

- Chemical Free

Conclusions

- Food is Connected to Many Aspects of our Culture and Identities
- In Making Decisions About What to Eat, Affect Often Wins
- Food Choices are Strongly Influenced by Hedonics
- The Risks and Benefits Associated with Food are Invisible, so we Depend on Proxies
- The Messages about Foods are Complex
- People Often Rely on Intuitively Plausible Heuristics/Rules
- Some Food Risks are Implied by "Free From" Claims

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