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PRINT EDITION
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Filling the world's belly

Dec 11th 2003

From The Economist print edition

Magnum



While the world's food is getting better, diet is getting worse. Consumers want their food tasty, cheap and convenient (and bad for them) but they want to be healthy too. Emma Duncan reports on the conflict between health and appetite

ONE of the great mysteries of the 20th century is how British food got so bad. In the Middle Ages, it seems to have been rather tasty and surprisingly Middle Eastern, with generous use of spices and almonds. There is nothing in history or literature to suggest that during the next five or six centuries it was any worse than anywhere else; but something seems to have happened in the 19th century, because by the 20th it was widely acknowledged to be disgusting.

A plausible explanation rests on the consequences of the industrial revolution. During the 19th century, so the argument goes, the rising middle classes aped the habits of the aristocracy. Titled women never went into the kitchen, so middle-class ladies abandoned cooking for more refined pursuits. The anonymous 19th-century author of "Dinners and Dinner Parties, or the Absurdities of Artificial Life" claimed that "a century ago the art of cookery was fashionable among English girls and Englishwomen...nowadays, piano mania and reception rooms are all that they think of; cookery is out of use, and only practised by the lower orders."

Still, the question of what went wrong with British food is now largely of academic interest, because things have got so much better over the past 20 years. The kitchen has been recolonised and transformed into the middle classes' main room. Britons have rediscovered their interest in food (they don't actually cook, but that is another matter). The newspapers are full of recipes and restaurant reviews; the cities are packed with new restaurants exploring the latest taste fad; the television schedules with their celebrity chef programmes. (Though this may be ominous: a customer once said darkly to Alain Senderens, a French chef, that when the Romans started to erect statues of their cooks, everything started to go downhill.)

The most noticeable change is in the quality of produce available

in shops. Twenty years ago, the only lettuce on offer was an iceberg, usually wrapped in cling-film and slightly yellow at the edges. Avocados were about as exciting as vegetables got. Tomatoes were either orange and hard as nails or red and mushy. These days Britain's supermarkets, among the best in the world, overflow with plenty and variety. Five years ago Tesco offered six or seven types of tomato. Now it offers 15. Quality has followed variety: several of these types of tomatoes smell and taste nice.

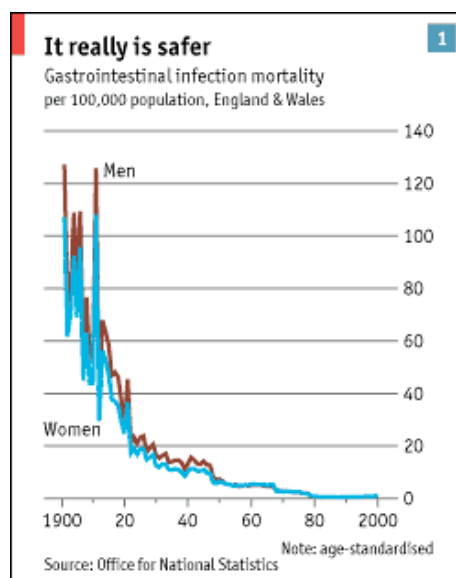
Britain started from a low base, so the improvement is particularly noticeable, but a similar change has taken place in other rich countries. And the food supply has improved in the developing world, where quantity is a more pressing issue than quality. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the number of undernourished people in developing countries dropped from 920m in 1980 to 799m 20 years later, even though the world's population grew by 1.6 billion over that period. Economists no longer draw scary lines proving that the world is going to run out of food in a few decades.

Yet you would not think that so much has got so much better. The awfulness of modern food is as reliable a conversational staple among the chattering classes as house prices and school fees. Front-page stories regularly lambast food companies for making the nation's children sick. People in the business talk about a crisis of trust. "There's a step change going on right now," argues Ray Goldberg, professor of agriculture and business at the Harvard Business School. "Never before have so many tools been available to improve nutrition and food economics. But never before has there been so much concern."

This is partly because food is an emotional, as well as an economic, issue. People have strong feelings about it in a way that they don't about computers or personal-care products. Food plays a central part in religious symbolism (wafers, wine, kosher, halal, sacred cows). Software and shampoo do not. Food is about national identity. José Bové's attack on "McMerde" would not have had the same force if he had taken on a telecoms giant.

Food is about national security. The original justification for subsidising rich-world farmers was that it was the government's job to ensure the stability of the food supply. Food production is about social harmony. Supporters of agricultural subsidies maintain they keep rural communities together. And food is about the environment, too, because farming has made the countryside what it is, and change in the way food is produced means change in the countryside.

Worries about food have sharpened in recent years for two main reasons. One is Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), ie, mad cow disease. Never mind that food is far safer than it was (see chart 1). Never mind that only 142 people have died in Britain from the human version of BSE, mutant CJD, as many as die in two weeks of car crashes. BSE was a potent mixture of the consequences of industrial agriculture (which, by pushing prices down, encouraged farmers to force cattle into cannibalism) and dissembling politicians (who failed to regulate farming properly, and then failed to tell consumers what was going wrong).



The other reason is obesity. In 2000 the World Health Organisation (WHO) produced a report that jolted governments awake about a growing threat to public health. Obesity, it said, was an epidemic. In some countries, more than half the population is overweight (see chart 2). And in December 2001, the United States surgeon-general, David Satcher, gave warning that obesity could soon kill as many people each year as smoking, and not because Americans are giving up the weed so fast.

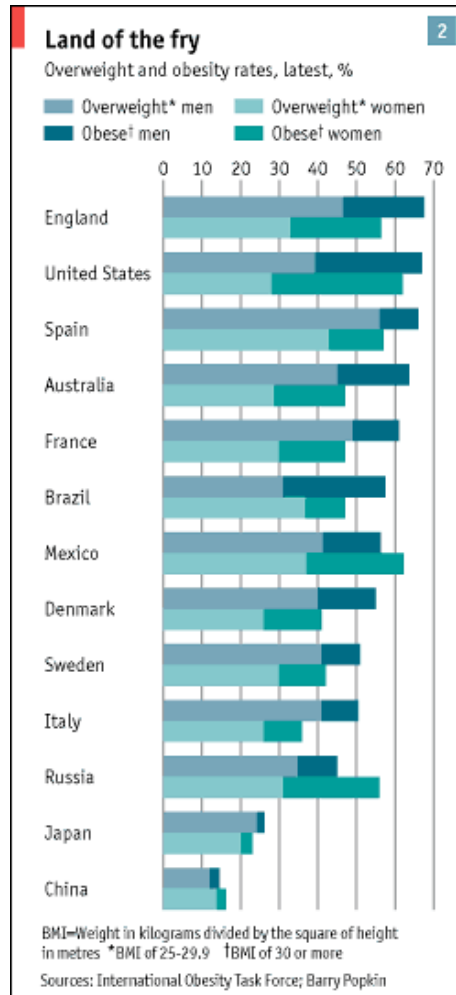
Food companies like to argue that most of the problem is indolence. People sitting at their desks don't use up the calories they used to tilling the fields. That is certainly true but it does not explain the rise in obesity over the past two decades. During that period calorie output in America stayed pretty stable, while average daily calorie intake went up from 2,080 to 2,347—enough to explain the nation's weight gain. And it isn't just people in rich countries who are getting fat.

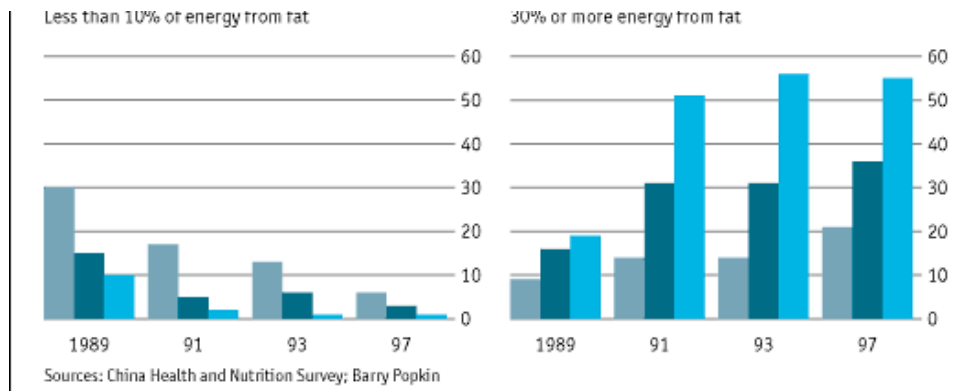
Paunchy Chinese

The treatments at China's Aimin weight-reduction hospitals are different from those at fat camps in the West. Acupuncture in the ear lobes, also used for drug addiction, plays an important part, as do herbal medicines and dance. Plenty of people seem to think it works. The first Aimin hospital was opened in 1992. There are now 22 of them in China. The chain has opened establishments in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea.

But if the treatments are different, the problem is similar. Although obesity rates in China are still lower than in rich countries, they are still alarming: 15% of men and 16% of women are overweight. In cities, where people are richer, many more are overweight: 33% in Beijing. The proportion of the population that is overweight is growing twice as fast as that in America in 1964-90. In the world as a whole, according to the WHO, more people are obese than malnourished.

That's because developing countries are going through a huge, and sudden, shift in the way they eat (see chart 3). Between 1989 and 1997, better-off Chinese cut their consumption of grains by 15%; their meat consumption increased by nearly half, their egg consumption doubled and their chicken and oils consumption tripled. What took a century to happen in the West has taken a decade in China, says Barry Popkin, of the University of North Carolina.





Bad times in the recent past may contribute to China's growing paunch. Some scientists think that adults who were malnourished in the womb or in infancy, as happened to many in the 1950s, may be particularly susceptible to weight gain. There is a psychological effect, too. Children in China tend to spend a lot of time with their grandparents, says Jun Jing, author of "Feeding China's Little Emperors". The grandparents were brought up short of food, so they think children should eat a lot. They tend to overfeed boys especially. And the one-child policy often means that there are four grandparents to a child, all of them competing to feed it.

The government, according to Zhai Fengying, deputy director of China's Institute of Nutrition and Food Safety, is not paying a lot of attention to the issue. "We go to high officials and tell them that this is serious, but they say they've got more important things to do." There are opposing worries, too. In 1998, a survey showed that Chinese schoolchildren were shorter than Japanese ones. The difference was greatest in poor rural areas, where Chinese aged 11 to 14 were 4cm shorter than similar Japanese. Its national pride wounded, the Chinese government decreed that schoolchildren should be issued with milk. But developing-country governments will have to pay attention soon, just as rich-country governments are trying to take action, because of the health consequences.

Being fat does not necessarily kill you, but it increases the risk that you will suffer from nasty diseases and die early. Women who are just overweight have a risk five times higher than the average of developing type-2 diabetes. Women who are severely obese (BMI, see chart 3, of 35 or over) have a risk more than 50 times higher. Obesity is implicated in cancer: a recent study in America showed that 14% of cancer deaths in men and 20% in women could be attributed to it. And being overweight is one of the main causes of heart disease, the world's biggest cause of death, above wars, malaria, AIDS or any of the other more spectacular killers.

The problem in developing countries is, in some ways, more troubling than that in the West. First, blacks and Asians are more susceptible to the diseases of obesity than are Caucasians. For instance, 3% of Chinese and 5.5% of Indians are diabetic, compared with 3% of (much fatter) Britons. There are more new cases of diabetes in China and India than there are in the rest of the world put together. Second, developing countries will have a harder time than western countries paying for the consequences of obesity. China is already spending 1.6% of its GDP a year treating non-communicable diseases (mostly obesity-related). That will rise.

As worries about obesity sharpen, so does the search for somebody to blame. Governments, newspapers and NGOs do not tend to accuse their voters, readers or members of being lazy slobs who should get off their sofas and stop stuffing their faces. Since consumers aren't expected to take responsibility, the finger of blame tends to point at producers.



Granny is being naughty again

This is a bit of a shock to the producers. It sits uncomfortably with their self-image. Many of them were founded by reformers or social visionaries: Britain's Cadburys were Quakers who thought chocolate a harmless alternative to alcohol; Dr John Harvey Kellogg was a passionate vegetarian; Henri Nestlé's mission was to find an artificial substitute for baby-milk for mothers who could not breast-feed. These companies all regard themselves as nurturers, who provide what consumers want.

The trouble is that consumers want contradictory things. They want to be healthy, but they also want their food to be tasty, cheap and convenient, all of which point in the opposite direction.