

Our evolving palate—professors examine what influences healthy, sustainable food choices

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"We eat first with our eyes."

This comment has been attributed to Marcus Gavius Apicius, a 1st Century Roman gourmand. Two thousand years later, academic research backs up Apicius' statement, as a team of marketing professors at the Fowler College of Business at San Diego State University (SDSU) have studied the sensory impact of food and the evolution of healthy eating.

SDSU associate professor, Dr. Morgan Poor, who has studied the impact of food on the senses knows firsthand how just an image of food can have a sensory and emotional effect on individuals. "Seeing a photo of a hamburger, for example, can stimulate other sensory images, causing individuals to imagine the taste or smell of that hamburger," she noted.

World Wide Health Crisis

Unfortunately, the pleasing aesthetics and easy access to [unhealthy foods](#) (such as hamburgers), along with limited access to healthy foods, may be leading to a worldwide health crisis. In fact, statistics released by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that 39 percent of all adults in the world are overweight and 13 percent are obese meaning they have a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more. The organization also noted that global obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1975.

Making Healthy Food Attractive is Key

One solution to obesity may involve focusing on the pleasure of eating which could be used a tool to promote healthy food choices. Research conducted by SDSU marketing professors Dr. Paula Peter, Dr. Iana Castro, and Dr. Sunaina Chugani, and recently published in the *Journal of Business Research* (print edition available July 2019), determined that associating healthy food with pleasurable experiences and emotions led to greater interest in purchasing or eating it.

The researchers cited a successful marketing campaign by Bolthouse Farms to reverse the sales decline of their brand of baby carrots. The campaign did not emphasize the carrots' healthy qualities, but embraced the sensory pleasure derived from eating them. For example, the neon orange color, crispy texture and crinkly sound of the packaging mimicked some of the characteristics of certain "junk foods" and led to an increase in product sales of 10 to 12 percent.

Breaking down Barriers to Healthy Foods

In the same research, the professors also noted that the two primary barriers to building pleasurable experiences around healthy foods are time and money. Time is needed to seek out the necessary ingredients to assemble a healthy meal or find a restaurant that serves good tasting, healthy food, where money is needed to purchase the restaurant meals or the ingredients (as well as the knives, pans and other tools) to create the end product. Based on [numerous studies](#), the professors concluded that money, more so than distance to the food or lack of time, is the primary barrier to healthy food access.

Castro has done extensive research on access to healthy foods (including fresh produce) for people living in lower income and ethnically-diverse

neighborhoods. Residents of underserved communities do not always have access to supermarkets and may rely on smaller food stores, liquor stores or corner stores to meet their food needs. These smaller stores are limited in the amount of healthy foods they can offer. However, distributors require minimum order quantities to cover their delivery costs and, in many cases, these minimum order requirements exceed store needs.

In an article that was co-authored by Castro that is forthcoming in *Translational Behavioral Medicine**, researchers studied whether stores that accept food assistance payments are able to meet the minimum stocking requirements set by United States Department of Agriculture. While the stocking requirements are meant to increase the amount of [healthy food](#) items available in smaller stores, the research suggests that stores are struggling to meet the requirements.

Taking Action

Castro decided she wanted to do more than just study food access challenges in underserved communities—she wanted to find a way to give community residents access to fresh produce while providing SDSU students a learning experience that increased their involvement in tackling pressing issues that impacted the local community.

Castro co-founded BrightSide Produce, a produce distribution service operated by SDSU students, to address the challenges faced by small stores in underserved communities. BrightSide Produce initially launched in June 2017 with five stores in National City, California, but word spread that the produce was popular with customers and profitable for the store owners. As of September 2019, BrightSide Produce was delivering [fresh produce](#) to 13 stores in National City, with plans to expand into the City of San Diego by the end of the year.

Respect for the Insect

What's next for academics, cooks and scientists wanting to find healthy, low-fat food sources that are also easily sustainable? Professor Peter is finding evidence to suggest a new food source may be coming to American menus soon:

Bugs.

While eating bugs (entomophagy) may be trending in epicurean circles, they would certainly lack eye appeal to most people and would seem to fly in the face of some of Peter's earlier research emphasizing the aesthetic attributes of healthy foods. However, given the popularity of edible bugs in other cultures, beauty may be in the eye of the beholder.

"Insects such as ants, grasshoppers, crickets and various kinds of larvae have been used as a low-fat source of protein in many parts of the world (especially in Asia), but have found little traction in the Western Hemisphere, especially the U.S.," said Peter. "While many people in Western culture find the practice of eating insects to be repugnant, they are actually high in protein and iron, as well as an inexpensive and sustainable [food](#) source."

Will American chefs and lovers of healthy foods be able to make bugs look good enough to eat? Stay tuned—Professor Peter is researching that now.

More information: Wided Batat et al, The experiential pleasure of food: A savoring journey to food well-being, *Journal of Business Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.12.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.12.024)

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