

Food Babe blogger Vani Hari taking heat over health science

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This image released by Vani Hari shows the food blogger among boxes of cereal in Charlotte, N.C. The former management consultant turned healthy-living activist has a best-selling book and an army of supporters. She deploys them regularly to move giants in the food industry via online petitions that, among other things, helped get Kraft Foods to give up artificial dyes in its macaroni and cheese. (Courtesy Vani Hari via AP)

As truth wars go, Vani Hari of the Food Babe blog has produced a doozy.

The former management consultant turned healthy-living activist has a best-selling book and an army of supporters. And with the help of her fans, she's led numerous successful online petitions to persuade food industry giants to rid their products of [ingredients](#) she deems unacceptable.

What Hari doesn't have, critics argue, is a background in related sciences or nutrition. And since starting her Food Babe blog in 2011, she's made mistakes that have landed her in a feeding frenzy.

"I think she means well, but I wish she would pick more important issues and pay closer attention to the science," said Marion Nestle, a nutrition, food studies and public health professor at New York University.

Hari certainly isn't the first food activist without a science background. So why has she become the food revolution figure that so many love to hate?

"Because we're winning," Hari said in a recent interview, citing numerous commitments by companies to provide more "clean" and "simple" ingredients, often in response to her campaigns.

The answer from Dr. Steven Novella, a clinical neurologist and assistant professor at Yale University's school of medicine, is more complicated. The working skeptic—he has a podcast and blogs—is one of Hari's most vocal foes. "It's almost like she's a food terrorist," he said. "She will target some benign ingredient that has a scary sounding name. Her criteria is if she can't pronounce it then it's scary."

You bet, said Hari, who thinks a host of chemicals and additives used in the U.S. have no business being consumed, and notes that many are not allowed or are strictly limited in Europe and elsewhere.

The heat for Hari, who grew up on processed food, is fairly recent as her presence has grown. She gets nearly 5 million blog readers a month. She also gets death threats. And she's banned so many people from her streams that they now have their own page on Facebook.

"I really do believe the attacks on me and this movement is a distraction from the need to reform the food system," Hari said by phone from Charlotte, North Carolina, where she lives. "My sole purpose is to get people healthier. Unfortunately, many of the critics out there, their sole purpose is only to criticize."

Much of the bashing, she said, amounts to "needles in haystacks." Among errors often cited by detractors are a couple that occurred in her early days. She deleted the posts and later acknowledged the mistakes.

One, from August 2011, had her taking issue with the air on planes being mixed with up to 50 percent nitrogen. She failed to consider that the atmosphere is comprised of 78 percent of the latter.

Another, from July 2012, trashed microwaves as destroying nutrients in food and producing malformed water crystals. The second notion is based on a bizarre theory by a controversial Japanese researcher who maintains that water crystals turn ugly when exposed to foul language.

"These were before I decided to make this my career. It's like saying that the New York Times or whoever aren't allowed to make mistakes. Back then I was blogging as a hobby," said Hari, who supports some alternative approaches to health and healing.

But even beyond these more egregious examples, Hari's mainstay tactics include overstating health risks and linking artificial ingredients with their non-edible uses, the latter a particularly effective way of rallying support. Last summer, for example, she took issue with Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors over a foam stabilizer and several other ingredients.

In that post, she referred to [propylene glycol](#), also found in airplane deicing liquid. Other bloggers claimed she meant propylene glycol alginate, an unrelated substance that comes from kelp. Neither were among ingredients in Budweiser and Miller Lite (which the companies posted in response to Hari), though both are allowed by U.S. regulators.

"What she does over and over again is target a chemical and try to provoke a disgust reflex by talking about what other purposes a chemical is used for or where it's derived from," Novella said.

Why do companies cave? Subway, for instance, removed azodicarbonamide, a chemical in its bread also found in yoga mats. But it's also found in plenty of other bread products, and is well-studied and safe, says Novella. He theorizes it's just easier, to some companies, to make questioned ingredients disappear.

"I think it's making a return-on-investment kind of evaluation. They figure choice A, explain to the public why this scary sounding chemical is safe or B, just get rid of it," Novella said.

It was Hari's railing against "toxic" levels of sugar and a widely used caramel coloring in the Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Latte that helped motivate Yvette d'Entremont in Los Angeles to begin blogging about her at Scibabe.com. Known as Science Babe (Note, there's another Science Babe out there), d'Entremont is by far Hari's most entertaining and trash-talkiest critic.

Under the headline, "The 'Food Babe' Blogger is Full of (Expletive)," d'Entremont—who once worked as an analytical chemist for a pesticide company—took after Food Babe earlier this month on Gawker over the seasonal latte.

"She took caramel color level IV and said that it was in (the government's) carcinogen class 2B. It sounds horrible, but there's another thing in the cup that is carcinogen class 2B: the coffee, because of the acrylamide from the roasting process," d'Entremont said.

"Between her egregious abuse of the word 'toxin' anytime there's a chemical she can't pronounce and asserting that everyone who disagrees with her is a paid shill, it's hard to pinpoint her biggest sin," d'Entremont said.

As for sugar in the latte, the average adult would need to down 40 to 50 of them in a sitting to have a toxic dose, counters d'Entremont. "And at that point you would also have a toxic dose of water and

caffeine."

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