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Food is changing: what we're eating, how we're eating it and where it's all coming from.



(Photo: Illustrations by C.J. Burton for USA WEEKEND)

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The way we eat — the kind of food we buy, where we get it, how it's prepared — has become a part of our identity, a guiding force that shapes how we live. It unites us. And divides us. Food brings people together in communal functions. But it also pits ideologies against each other: vegetarians vs. carnivores; all-natural evangelists vs. the convenience crowd; calorie counters vs. indulgence seekers.

No matter where individuals fall on the spectrum, we are a country obsessed with food. And with a seeming explosion in allergies, heightened concerns over obesity, increased scrutiny of chemical additives and growing environmental concerns, there's more attention being paid to what we eat than perhaps ever before. After decades of stocking our kitchens with meat, cheese and noodles, while simultaneously dieting to reverse the effects of all those fatty, starchy foods, we may be realizing that food isn't just a way to live, it's a lifestyle choice.

"We're beginning to get to where Eastern culture has been for thousands of years," says Mark Erickson, provost at the Culinary Institute of America and a certified master chef, "which is the idea that food is medicine, and we cannot disassociate our health with what we eat."

So where is this all headed?

USA WEEKEND asked some experts: How will Americans be eating in five years? Here's what they said about the future of food:

Food that's good for us will taste better

A growing number of chefs, food bloggers and restaurateurs have started dedicating themselves to promoting healthy food that's also delicious. They're finding ways to cut down on fat, sugar and meat and still make money. Vegan bakery Sticky Fingers in Washington, D.C., won the Food Network's *Cupcake Wars*, and restaurants such as New York City's Dirt Candy and Philadelphia's Vedge are **making vegetables the star of great meals.**

"There are plenty of restaurants and food purveyors out there that are working to make nutrient-dense food delicious and appealing and exciting," says Trish Watlington, owner of two **farm-to-table restaurants** in San Diego **where she supplies most of the produce for the menu from her garden.**

At Andrea McGinty's vegan restaurant chain, Native Foods Cafe, most customers aren't even vegan. "I bet one person would raise their hand," she says. "All the rest are looking for a better way to eat."

Betting that she'd be able to make vegan food — or a plant-based diet, as she likes to call it — mainstream, McGinty moved the headquarters of Native Foods from the health-nut hills of Palm Springs, Calif., to Chicago (a city once known as "Hog Butcher for the World"). McGinty was confident she'd be able to change people's minds about her "hippie dippie" food, and she has designs on growing from 17 stores across the USA to more than 200 in the next five years.

McGinty says vegan is going mainstream as people seek healthier, convenient options. Included on her menus is a "bacon cheeseburger" made with seitan, a gluten-based meat alternative; caramelized onions; tofu bacon; and battered dill pickle chips. "When you can have something that tastes delicious and it feels good in your body and you feel like you did something good for yourself, why wouldn't it sell?" she says.

Farm-to-table will trickle down

The advent of farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants have brought food sourcing to the forefront of Americans' consciousness. Not only are strawberries grown an hour away fresher and better tasting than the ones that spent days or even weeks being shipped across the country, buying that produce supports the local economy and a more sustainable way of eating.

But it's also expensive. Access to locally grown produce is still relatively reserved for those who can afford it and have the time to seek it out. "Unfortunately, if you're a single mom and work two jobs and can barely put food on the table, you don't have time to think about where your food came from," Watlington says.

That could change if the country collectively demands better food. Watlington hopes that support of local farmers and farmers markets, and programs that introduce kids to gardening, will help make access to better food a national movement. "If you can have this happen on a grass-roots level, then it spreads so it's in the community. No one is dieting. They're just eating better food."

Erickson says the farmers market movement already serves a broader purpose. "As people begin to look for (fresh food) in their everyday dining occasion, they put more pressure on grocery and other fast-food segments of the industry."

That has already started to happen, with companies such as Subway being called out for the chemicals they've added to food. Other major brands, such as Cheerios, are eliminating genetically modified organisms. And Panera Bread is removing artificial ingredients from everything on its menu by the end of 2016.

"I think the only way that it really changes is if it becomes a class-divide issue," says Mary Beth Albright, a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer who specializes in sustainable food issues and a former contestant on *Food Network Star*. "Like, look, all these other people are getting better things than you. Either ... the traceability movement is going to be reserved for the elite, or everything is going to have to go sustainable."

We might see ads for broccoli

Another way to make produce cheaper? Get people to buy more of it. Processed foods dominate the grocery business, luring us with million-dollar marketing campaigns that show up on our TV screens as commercials with our favorite athletes or celebrities, in magazine ads and in eye-catching store displays.

"The problem is there's no branding in produce," says Michael Moss, author of *Salt Sugar Fat*, about the processed-food industry. "The power of marketing is huge."

The produce growers could catch on, he says. "Absolutely we could see the produce association getting Madison Avenue-savvy and competing with snack foods and the rest of the grocery store in that arena," says Moss, who last year challenged an ad agency that has worked with Coca-Cola and General Mills to come up with an ad campaign for broccoli.

Unfortunately, the government doesn't necessarily make it easy, Moss says. "How do we level the playing field for people financially to make it possible for them to eat healthier in ways that aren't going to cripple their budgets?" he asks. "One big way would be to totally rethink the Department of Agriculture. Because so much of that agency's energy and research and development money is going into crops that fuel the highly processed food industry. And so little of it is going into making fruits and vegetables less expensive."

We'll see the end of the diet

Can a country that has built an entire industry around dieting decide to, instead, just eat healthier all the time?

Groups of people have adopted gluten-free diets even though they're not technically allergic to gluten. Others prescribe themselves the Paleo diet, eating the protein-heavy, dairy-free foods of our Stone Age ancestors.

When it comes to eating, we are a country of extremes, Erickson says, opting for meat and potatoes or doing a complete 180 and going only for vegetarian and non-fat food. But what were once considered specialty diets are starting to be combined and adopted into a more balanced and manageable way of eating all the time.

"Somewhere in between is something we cannot treat as a diet, but treat as an accepted and sought-for lifestyle as it relates to what we consume," Erickson says.

And as fresher, local food not only becomes more widely available but is prepared in ways that are appealing, "eventually people will make more choices of things that are better for them because it tastes good," Watlington says, "not because they're necessarily disciplined about it."