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The Way We Live Now



Drewnowski gave himself a hypothetical dollar to spend, using it to purchase as many calories as he possibly could. He discovered that he could buy the most calories per dollar in the middle aisles of the supermarket, among the towering canyons of processed food and soft drink. (In the typical American supermarket, the fresh foods — dairy, meat, fish and produce — line the perimeter walls, while the imperishable packaged goods dominate the center.) Drewnowski found that a dollar could buy 1,200 calories of cookies or potato chips but only 250 calories of carrots. Looking for something to wash down those chips, he discovered that his dollar bought 875 calories of soda but only 170 calories of orange juice.

As a rule, processed foods are more “energy dense” than fresh foods: they contain less water and fiber but more added fat and

sugar, which makes them both less filling and more fattening. These particular calories also happen to be the least healthful ones in the marketplace, which is why we call the foods that contain them “junk.” Drewnowski concluded that the rules of the food game in America are organized in such a way that if you are eating on a budget, the most rational economic strategy is to eat badly — and get fat.

This perverse state of affairs is not, as you might think, the inevitable result of the free market. Compared with a bunch of carrots, a package of Twinkies, to take one iconic processed foodlike substance as an example, is a highly complicated, high-tech piece of manufacture, involving no fewer than 39 ingredients, many themselves elaborately manufactured, as well as the packaging and a hefty marketing budget. So

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You Are What You Grow

Will this year’s farm bill make us fatter and sicker? By Michael Pollan

A few years ago, an obesity researcher at the University of Washington named Adam Drewnowski ventured into the supermarket to solve a mystery. He wanted to figure out why it is that the most reliable predictor of obesity in America today is a person’s wealth. For most of history, after all, the poor have typically suffered from a shortage of calories, not a surfeit. So how is it that today the people with the least amount of money to spend on food are the ones most likely to be overweight?

Photograph by Brian Ulrich

FARM AID

States that received the most and the least in U.S.D.A. subsidies in 2005.

