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William Kohlmeyer
South Dakota State University

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• South Dakota State University

• Brookings 57006

• (605) 688-4141

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CHANGES IN FOOD HABITS AND CONSUMPTION

Recent dramatic changes in food supplies and in the prices of some food items have focused attention on some of the problems involved in providing one of man's basic needs. People who eat two or three meals each day, and who regularly shop at food stores are aware of the short-run effects of limited supplies of food items that are desired or used by large numbers of consumers.

What may be less apparent, but vitally important in the long-run, are the changes in patterns of food usage that occur over a period of several years. The South Dakota producer of food, or feed, who can most accurately predict future food trends, should be in a relatively favorable position to cope with future production problems.

The total pounds of food used per capita in the United States has been quite stable. For many years, total food usage per person per year was about 1500 pounds. This has gone up only very little, even during the recent period of relatively high employment and rising personal incomes. It is the "mix" of items in the market basket, rather than the size of the basket, that is likely to change as we experience changes in income.

The proportion of food used away from home has been increasing for more than twenty years. Both institutional food services and public food serving establishments have experienced growing volumes of sales. So-called "fast service" food firms have shown a very

rapid rate of growth. This growth has occurred even though the cost of food away from home has risen much more rapidly than the cost of food at home. There seems to be little reason to expect a reversal of this trend.

There are very few, if any, of our common food items for which reasonably good substitutes cannot be found. When any one item may be in short supply, and consequently high in price, consumers are very adept in changing their buying habits so that the usage of products with similar nutritional or functional properties is increased. Thus poultry, fish, beans and peas may serve as replacements for red meats. Vegetable oils may replace fats of animal origin. Fruits and vegetables present a very wide assortment of choices. When butter has seemed to be expensive, many consumers turned to margarine.

When religious or ethnic customs specify a narrow range of food items for a particular event or observance, and these few items happen to be in short supply, their prices may advance drastically. However, in most situations the substitution principle tends to keep the prices of various foods in a given category in a reasonably constant relationship.

For many years, estimates have been made of the average annual consumption of certain food products. These estimates of annual per capita consumption can be very useful in indicating long-range changes in food preferences and

habits. For example, in the case of livestock products, since 1960, the usage of poultry meat has increased about 50 per cent. Beef and veal usage has increased about 25 per cent. The rate of pork consumption has held quite steady, while usage of eggs and dairy products has declined.

Since 1960, the use of edible vegetable oils has increased nearly 50 per cent. Average consumption of processed (frozen, canned, dried) fruits and vegetables has increased nearly 20 per cent. Use of cereal and bakery products has declined slightly, and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables (excluding melons) has declined by 10 per cent.

These changes have occurred during a period when disposable personal incomes have been rising, when labor costs have been rising, and when increased numbers of women have been employed outside the home.

The application of new technology can exert a strong influence on patterns of change in food choices. These developments may result in products that are less costly, that require less expertise or preparation time in the home kitchen, or that provide improved nutrition or taste satisfaction. The develop-

ment and wide acceptance of prepared cake mixes changed the use of processed eggs. The innovation of merchandising frozen foods has had profound effects on the use of meats, poultry, fruits, and vegetables. Mechanized processing of many food products has often resulted in lower costs, or improved sanitation, or both. Increased availability of frozen food storage in homes and institutions has influenced buying habits and choice of foods. For some time usage of potatoes seemed to be declining. The development of improved processed forms of potato products is credited with reversing this trend.

Certainly we may expect further changes in selection and use of individual food items in the future. The precise nature of these changes will probably be related to factors such as:

1. Levels of employment and income.
2. Employment of women outside the home.
3. International trade policies.
4. Development of new technology and innovation.
5. Changes in the numbers of people engaged in manual labor.

The consumer helps to determine changes each time a food item is purchased.

William Kohlmeyer, Professor of Economics

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