Originally published Saturday, June 25, 2005 at 12:00 AM

**Why you can't sit down to eat without making a statement**

In an increasingly globalized market, parts of every meal have economic or political ramifications, as well as feeding the ongoing debate of organic vs. mass-produced crops.

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Even as the market explodes for fresh and organic foods, the amount of processed food consumed by Americans continues to grow — a market eating up $500 billion of the national annual grocery bill.

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Whether consumers care or not, just about everything they eat is spiked with implications for the environment, international trade, health and the American economy.

Some people talk of how buying some foods undermines the world's rain forests or coastlines. Others campaign to save the American family farm or improve conditions for foreign laborers. Some call for the American system of big farms and companies to get bigger and deliver ever-cheaper food. Box labels and grocery shelves don't mention the federal fights over tariffs and subsidies, but they're there.

In the global village of 21st-century food production, what you eat makes a political statement.

**Big Ag**

For many, purchasing McNuggets is a tacit endorsement of Big Agriculture — from genetically engineered crops that make for cheaper feed, to concentrated poultry barns where manure can spoil the local groundwater, to a system of production that leaves little room for smaller farms.

At the same time, however, McDonald's has responded to public pressure. The fast-food chain uses its substantial buying power to insist that suppliers not dose their chickens with antibiotics to promote growth. The company has also been commended by animal-rights groups for pressuring slaughterhouses into using more humane methods — imposing its standards by surprise audits at packing houses.

Granola stands as the iconic organic snack — that healthful mix of grains and dried fruit. When certified organic, the nibbler can chow down knowing the food was grown without pesticides.

But most oats in this country are imported — new short-season varieties of more heavily subsidized soybeans have elbowed oats out of acres in the upper Midwest. So if that granola isn't certified organic, its oats were probably grown in countries with less stringent labor standards and are more likely to carry traces of pesticides outlawed in the U.S.

**Imports jump**

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In fact, there's hardly a meal that doesn't relate in some way to legislative food fights in Washington pitting home-grown lobbies against foreign-interest groups, one region opposite another, or crop-versus-crop. Even as America ships its meat and grain around the planet, the country imports 13 percent of its food — 56 percent more than two decades ago.

As food crosses borders, so do trade squabbles such as those between the United States and Europe over wine and cheese.

Still, picky eaters are every bit as influential in such matters as politicians.

Consumer pressure changed fishing practices so now countries that don't properly monitor dolphin-free tuna catches face U.S. import restrictions. Starbucks and others hold on to consumers by making their suppliers deliver "shade-grown" coffee raised below the rain-forest canopy rather than on land razed to make way for farming. A generation ago boycotts of grapes gave bargaining leverage to California farmworkers.

Today the debate over the best way to stock pantries churns on.

"This global food system has been a great benefit to agribusiness, but it has not been a benefit at all for farmers," said Ben Lilliston of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a group that sees itself as the champion of small family farms. "Both here and in the developing world, there are fewer farmers every day."

**The virtues of yield**

Go organic if you want, say others, but big-scale farming feeds the world.

"We haven't given high-yield farming enough credit for the high yield," said Dennis Avery, director of the agribusiness-supported Center for Global Food Issues and author of "Saving the Planet with Pesticides and Plastic."

Avery and other defenders of conventional large-scale agriculture say it makes food cheap. Government research shows that in 1930 Americans spent an average of 21.2 percent of their family income on food. Today, that portion is 6.1 percent — the lowest in the world.

What's more, American food is typically safer than that consumed by the rest of the developed world. And incidences of food-borne illness caused by listeria, salmonella and E. coli continue to decline.

"We spend less than anyone else," said American Meat Institute spokeswoman Janet Riley, "and we get the safest food."

Even as the market explodes for fresh and organic foods, the amount of processed food consumed by Americans continues to grow — a market eating up $500 billion of the national annual grocery bill.

"American consumers are concerned about what they're eating, but they put a priority on making it work with their lifestyle," said Stephanie Childs of the Grocery Manufacturers of America. "They want to know: How convenient is it? Will it fit into their family's budget? Will their kids even eat it?"

Still, advocates for various trade, environmental or labor standards say food's path to market matters.

**The salmon debate**

Consider salmon, chock full of heart-healthy omega 3 fatty acids. Demand is up, but natural fisheries are dwindling.

"Farm-raised" salmon has grown popular as depleted fisheries have made wild salmon harder to find and even harder to afford. But farmed salmon have been found in repeated studies to contain higher levels of PCBs, contaminants that pregnant women and nursing mothers have been advised to avoid. Critics also complain about the excessive use of antibiotics with aquaculture.

The author of "Dwellers in the Land," environmentalist Kirkpatrick Sale, is a fierce advocate for buying seasonally and regionally. He said that when people attempt to bring global variety to their diet, they end up supporting the reckless use of natural resources and corporations he says have little financial incentive to protect the environment.

Yet the federal government and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations estimate that fishing open waters can meet only half the global demand for seafood as commercial fish stocks decline worldwide.

"Aquaculture is a sustainable alternative," said Stacey Felzenberg, a spokeswoman for the National Fisheries Institute, which represents fishermen, processors and restaurants.

**Big on shrimp**

Americans have yet to develop much farm-raised shrimp, but they eat plenty of it. The environmental group Worldwatch Institute estimates that as much as 35 percent of the world's coastal mangrove forests have been destroyed in the past 20 years, mostly for shrimp farms. Even with tariffs used to discourage dumping — importing below cost to capture the market — more than 85 percent of the shrimp consumed in the United States is imported, chiefly from Thailand and China. Meantime, the number of American shrimpers trawling the Gulf of Mexico has fallen by half in the past five years.

"We can compete on taste," said Ewell Smith of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board. "We can't compete on price."

The global market of vegetables doesn't offer such a price break, but rather cherries and pineapples in the Midwest in winter. Much of America's whole fruits and vegetables are harvested green in another country and ripen on the way to market.

That gives Americans a variety of food once unimagined. But those who advocate buying locally say such imports reduce the incentive of U.S. farmers to grow produce and encourage them to turn to more subsidized commodity grains.

In 1997, an outbreak of potentially fatal hepatitis A from frozen strawberries shipped from Mexico sickened 270 people in five states, 130 Michigan schoolchildren among them. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says imported food is three times more likely than U.S.-grown food to be contaminated with illegal pesticide residues.

The Environmental Working Group found those chemicals on 18.4 percent of strawberries, 15.6 percent of head lettuce and 12.3 percent of carrots imported from Mexico. Whether that poses a health risk is controversial.

FDA inspections of imported food dropped from about 8 percent before the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement to less than 2 percent five years later as import volume ballooned.

Now comes the Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, pending before Congress. This country's sugar industry, in which strict quotas limiting production prop up U.S. sugar costs to nearly three times the world market, fears the agreement.

Government farm subsidies in the United States and Europe draw criticism from groups who say such policies keep crop prices artificially low. That, in turn, discourages farmers in poor countries from trying to compete.

Buy chocolate and you risk supporting Ivory Coast plantations notorious for using child slave labor to grow and harvest cocoa. Drink java, and unless it's shade-grown, you could be accused of encouraging destruction of South American rain forests to make room for your coffee beans. Even your table's floral centerpiece carries implications. Half the cut flowers sold in the United States are grown in Colombia, where human-rights groups say farmworkers are exposed to dangerous amounts of pesticides.

Kate Van Ummersen, who sells cheese made by dairies that shun antibiotics and hormones, tried briefly and largely in vain to peddle organic flowers in the Pacific Northwest. She touted them as more people- and planet-friendly than imported flowers.

"People would say, 'Why should I care? I don't eat flowers,' " she said. "They just weren't willing to pay a premium for organic flowers."

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