It Was 40 Years Ago Today...

BY DAVID SCHARDT

In 1971, when the Center for Science in the Public Interest—the non-profit consumer-advocacy group that publishes *Nutrition Action Healthletter*—hung out its shingle in Washington D.C., the food world looked very different from what it is today.

Foods like tofu, whole wheat bread, and brown rice were hard to come by. People made their own yogurt, smoothies, and granola. Salads were mostly iceberg lettuce, milk was mostly whole, and coffee was either black or with cream and sugar. We cooked more and snacked less. We ate less and weighed less.

Here's a brief stroll down memory lane to remember how much things have changed.

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**Everyone Gets a Microwave**

In 1971, fewer than one out of every 100 U.S. households owned a microwave oven. Today, only five out of 100 don't. Still, microwaves are only used to make about 20 percent of all meals that are prepared at home. While that's double what it was 25 years ago, the stove top remains the most popular appliance for cooking dinner.

**Eating Out Becomes In**

In the early 1970s, Americans spent a third of their food dollars on meals prepared outside the home. Today, eating out eats up half of our food money.

While convenient, the shift has left its mark on the national waistline. Food prepared away from home typically has more calories (and sodium). That, coupled with ever-expanding restaurant portions, has made eating out one of the main culprits in the alarming rise in obesity.

**Big Mac's Legacy Lingers**

McDonald's Big Mac was four years old in 1971. The company invented it to compete with a large two-patty hamburger sold by rival Big Boy.

Today, the Big Mac doesn't seem so big. Its 540 calories are dwarfed by, among others, Burger King's Whopper (670 calories), McDonald's Angus burgers (750 to 790 calories), and Wendy's Bacon Deluxe Triple hamburger (1,150 calories).

**Dietary Supplement Sales Explode**

In 1994, Congress passed landmark legislation giving companies a free hand to make claims about a staggering variety of nutrients, herbs, hormones, and other chemicals, without needing much, if any, evidence.

Within a few years, sales had tripled. In 2010, the industry sold more than $25 billion worth of supplements in vitamin shops, supermarkets, drug stores, and on-line.

**Supermarkets Expand**

In 1971, a typical supermarket carried just under 8,000 items. In 2009, it was more than 48,000.

At many supermarkets, you can pick up dinner at the cooked-food bar, grab some Kalamatas at the olive bar, cash a check at the in-store bank branch, and fill a prescription at the in-store pharmacy.

In 1988, Walmart introduced its first Supercenter, which put groceries and countless other merchandise under one roof. Fourteen years later, the company became the nation's largest grocer.

**We're Eating More Food ...and More Calories**

In 1970, there were 1,675 pounds of food available for every person in the United States to eat.
In 2003, it was up to 1,950 pounds. That means an extra 500 calories a day was being produced for every man, woman, and child. The increase in available food is more than enough to account for our steadily rising weight.

What are we eating more of? Just about everything, though fats and oils (200 more calories a day), grains (190 more calories), and sugars (75 more calories) lead the way.

**Imported Foods Soar**

In the early 1970s, imported food typically meant something like a jar of Spanish olives, a bottle of Italian olive oil, or a bar of Swiss chocolate. And, of course, bananas from Central America. Today, it could be anything from fresh mozzarella from Italy to frozen peas from China.

The average American eats roughly 260 pounds of imported food every year. Imports account for close to 15 percent of our diet. They bring us peaches and cherries in the winter and fresh salmon all year round. About a quarter of our fruit, half of our nuts, and more than two-thirds of our fish and shellfish come from overseas.

But the ability to eat whatever we want whenever we want has its downside. The Food and Drug Administration, which oversees roughly 80 percent of the food supply, inspects only about 1 percent of the food that enters the United States.

**Food Advertising Swamps Eat-Healthy Messages**

In 2008, McDonald’s spent $1.2 billion on advertising in the United States. That’s 12 times as much as it spent in the 1970s. And Coca-Cola spends 13 times more than it did back then.

In 1972, total domestic food, beverage, and restaurant advertising was $2.5 billion. In 2004, it hit $11 billion.

For every $1 spent on ads that urge us to eat at least five fruits and vegetables a day, the food and beverage industries spend $1,100 enticing us to buy fast-food meals, soft drinks, sugary breakfast cereals, and a host of other foods that have led to massive waist sprawl.

**Trans Fat Plummet**

In 2003, the Food and Drug Administration announced that, starting in 2006, food labels would have to disclose the amount of trans fat in each serving. So it’s no surprise that food manufacturers began using—no less—shortening.

But by the early 1990s, researchers had discovered thattrans fat, which is created when oil is partially hydrogenated to make shortening and stick margarine, raises LDL ("bad") cholesterol and lowers HDL ("good") cholesterol. That’s a double whammy for your heart.

In 2003, the Food and Drug Administration announced that, starting in 2006, food labels would have to disclose the amount of trans fat in each serving. So it’s no surprise that food manufacturers began to seriously cut out shortening in 2005.

Since then, we estimate that two-thirds of the trans fat in the American diet has been eliminated. Bravo!

**Organic Foods Go Mainstream**

By 1971, Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, which exposed the damage that pesticides could do to wildlife, had been out for nine years. And the Rodale family was preaching sustainable farming in its magazine *Organic Gardening*. But you couldn’t buy organic produce in your grocery store, no matter what you were willing to spend.

In 1990, a coalition of groups (including CSPI) persuaded Congress to pass the Organic Foods Production Act. But it took 12 more years of negotiations before the U. S. Department of Agriculture finally issued rules that farmers had to follow to call their foods “organic.”

Today, organic food is a $25-billion-a-year industry, fresh and processed organic food is available in virtually every supermarket, and a third of U. S. consumers say that they buy organic foods at least once a month.

**Obesity Rates Spin Out of Control**

In 2008, when the producers of “Taking Woodstock” began casting for their movie dramatizing the 1969 concert, their biggest challenge was to find extras who were as skinny as the original concertgoers.

Not that everybody was lean back then. In the 1970s, one out of two American adults was overweight or obese. Today, it’s two out of three. And the obese have gone from one out of seven to one out of three Americans between the ages of 20 and 74.

Excess weight increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and osteoarthritis.

And youngsters aren’t immune. The percentage of overweight children and adolescents has tripled over the past 40 years. Public health experts worry that extra pounds may make today’s children the first generation of Americans to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

**Nutrition Facts Labels Ride to the Rescue**

If you read a typical food label in 1971, you wouldn’t have had a clue how many calories or how much fat or sodium was in each serving.

Shopping for healthy foods got a whole lot easier with the introduction of the “Nutrition Facts” label on food packages in 1993. Today, two out of three shoppers say that they use the labels to help figure out what to buy.