

INFLUENCES OF CHANGES IN PRODUCTION ON CONSUMER FOOD HABITS

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For a foodstuff to obtain a fixed place in a diet of a population, four things are essential: (1) it must be a relatively economical source of some utility which is recognized by consumers; (2) production must be organized so that it is available in adequate quantities and at prices which appeal to consumers; (3) commercial distribution must be organized to provide for regular and economical distribution; and (4) a considerable number of people must have become habituated to its use.

The idea of change in food habits is comparatively new. Under conditions of difficult transportation, most people consumed the commodities native to the locality or geographical area. Foods habits, which thus tend to become fixed, are carried with people when they emigrate. Under modern conditions, which permit a wide variety of foods to be available, the existence of population groups with differing food habits gives rise to demands for a wide variety of products in such a country as the United States.

Cheapening of transportation tends toward nationalizing and internationalizing of food materials. High transportation costs and inefficient distribution systems are bars to this widening. The maintenance of the level of transportation costs at a time when prices and incomes are falling, as occurred in 1929-1932, tends to greater localization of food supplies.

The change in consumption of individual classes of foods and their relation to production are briefly summarized:

Milk and Dairy Products.—The increased consumption of milk which had taken place for some years up to the beginning of the current depression was influenced greatly by improvements in quality. Basic to this was the adoption of pasteurization for large city milk supplies. Increased real incomes in the period following the War was an important factor in the increased consumption. This increased demand required a complete reorganization of the production end of the industry. Production per cow has been greatly increased through breeding, better feeding, and better care. The expansion in demand for butterfat has made necessary the development of dairying of an extensive type in new areas. In general, changes in production and production methods resulted from changes in demand and consumption.

Meats.—It should be noted that an analysis of changes in consumption of the different kinds of meats is complicated by cycles in production which characterize the different species of domestic animals. We consume what we produce with some modification for changes in storage stock, in imports of cattle and beef, and in exports of pork. Price changes adjust consumption to altered supplies. The consumption of beef per capita has now declined or been about stationary for several years, due to the position of the industry in its cycle. Actually numbers of cattle have been increasing for three or four years and as soon as marketings are increased, consumption will expand.

Leaving cycles out of consideration, there has been but little tendency for meat consumption in the United States to change over the last twenty years. More pork and somewhat less beef is being consumed. This probably reflects the fact that hogs can convert grain into meat more economically than can cattle, that relative prices cause pork to be more attractive to consumers, and that relative profits cause hogs to be more attractive to producers. Two trends are to be observed in beef production: First, changes in methods of production stimulated by consumer preferences cause production of increased numbers of lighter weight, younger animals; second, growth of the dairy industry yields an increased quantity of low-grade beef.

The increase in the available supply of pork in the year immediately following the War was caused by a series of large corn crops from 1919 to 1923. The subsequent large volume of production does not reflect large crops of feed grains but rather the diversion of corn from feeding work animals and as a human food to the production of pork and the increased efficiency of production due to lower losses from disease and better all-around management. Decreasing exports have also made more of the total supply available for the home market.

The increase in consumption of lamb in the last two years is a cyclical phenomenon. Sheep flocks have been built up and marketing increased. The price has lowered relatively and consumers have adjusted their buying practices to the changed supply.

Cereals.—Production is not a limiting factor in the consumption of any cereal product used as human food in the United States. We have a surplus above domestic food requirements of all cereals commonly used in this country as food. The decline in per capita consumption of wheat and corn in the United States, which has occurred over the last thirty years, cannot be explained by any change in production. Historically hard wheat replaced soft wheat to a large extent as a source of the bread flour used in this country. This was made possible by the large areas of semi-arid land adapted to production of hard wheat, the invention of suitable milling machinery, and the development of farming methods and cultural practices for the economical production of wheat in these areas.

Vegetables.—In recent years there has been a rapid expansion in the consumption of vegetables. Vegetables may be divided into two classes: first, those like potatoes for which the demand is relatively fixed; second, those like lettuce for which the demand is quite flexible. The production of the first class is largely governed by the demand subject to large seasonal differences caused by variations in yield per acre and some tendency toward cyclical changes in acreage consumption tends to be quite fixed. The consumption of the second class is influenced by availability and may be rapidly expanded as production is developed. The recent rapid expansion in consumption of vegetables of the second class is based on the following factors: (1) the development of refrigeration in transit; (2) the development of production in areas remote from consumption centers which made possible a perennial fresh supply; (3) availability in a large variety of stores where they are sold by display; (4) increasing recognition of the dietary value of vegetables, the search of consumers for flavor, and higher real incomes which made possible a more varied diet.

Fruits.—Consumption of fruit is influenced by production over considerable periods of time, because of the long production period required. Production, and hence consumption, of citrus fruits has expanded rapidly in recent years. Consumption of apples has not similarly increased because

the trend in production has not been upward. The rapid increase in consumption of bananas reflects the influence of large scale plantation production and a very efficient distribution system.

Fats and oils.—A rapid increase in output of a number of kinds of fats and oils in recent years has created a surplus above ordinary food requirements.

Sugar.—With the development of large scale plantation production of cane sugar and technical improvements in beet sugar production, particularly in Europe, the cost of sugar has been greatly lessened and its consumption has very rapidly expanded.

Importance of Dietary Standards to Agricultural Development.—Changes in food habits react on agricultural production. Decrease in consumption of cereals tends to lower the demand for them and their relative prices. The increases in consumption of milk, lettuce, and oranges have the opposite effects. The effect of such shifts is to weaken the economic position of producers and regions which produce the first type of commodity and strengthen the position of the second.

From a national standpoint the shift from cheap sources of foods like wheat to more expensive products like milk and vegetables means a more expensive diet, but one which makes it possible to utilize more people in the farming industry. With large numbers of people, who because of technological unemployment or because of the depression cannot find productive employment elsewhere, it is desirable that consumption of the foodstuffs which involve most labor be maintained. It is desirable that prices of these products be kept as low as possible in view of costs and that cheap methods of distribution be used so as to maintain consumption of them at as high a level as is possible. To this end all agencies involved in production and consumption need to cooperate.