



Whitepaper

How do we
balance pleasure in
**our diet with health
concerns?**

How do we balance pleasure in our diet with public health concerns?

Public health messaging and rising obesity rates make the guilt-free indulgence a challenge.

The market for pleasure-based foods is changing as public health concerns influence consumer buying habits. One example is the way mass-produced chocolate sales are falling while artisan chocolates are on the rise. This whitepaper suggests we look to the past when pleasure-based indulgences were treated as special occasions rather than every day occurrences.

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The food industry is facing an existential threat that is creating uncertainty about the future of pleasure-based foods. Public health fears are changing attitudes towards foods that were in the past treated as guilt-free pleasures, such as chocolates, sweets, wafers, pastries, cookies and so on.

The food industry has long argued pleasure-based foods should be eaten in moderation. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes obesity as an energy imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended. Foods are not intrinsically unhealthy they just need to be consumed in moderation in the context of a sedentary life. Modernity has resulted in us expending less energy than our ancestors. With that societal shift has come the need for us to reassess our relationship with energy-rich foods.

The pleasure factor

There will always be a place in our diets for energy boosts combined with moments of guilt-free reward or pleasure. Sweets, when taken in moderation, provide that moment of invigoration and enjoyment that can boost morale. Chocolate has always been associated with moments of pleasure, celebration and ritual.

The Aztecs believed cocoa to be a gift from their gods to be enjoyed by ordinary people during weddings and feasts.¹ By the 1500s chocolate was a much-loved indulgence of the Spanish Court and by the 17th century a fashionable drink throughout Europe. It was not until the

late 19th century and early 20th century that chocolate was mass produced to include sugar and additives rather than cocoa. Those elements of celebration, ceremony, exclusivity and gifting remain today.

Each year on Valentine's Day, Americans dig deep into their pockets and spend USD 1.7 billion on chocolates for their loved ones.² Research into the psychology of Valentine's Day gifting shows we are culturally primed to associate chocolates with love.³

Reframing how foods are consumed

Chocolates are hard wired into our social constructs around gifting, they are integral to family events and are a long-established way of showing appreciation on Mother's Day. We all have childhood memories favorite sweets or chocolates, regardless of quality. A chocolate bar will forever be emotionally associated with an event, like the memory of the chocolate your grandfather bought when you went skiing.

The Christian ceremony of Easter is also a time of chocolate indulgence. The egg, a pagan symbol of rebirth and Christian symbol of resurrection, was first created out of chocolate in the 19th century with the first Cadbury Easter egg making its appearance in 1875.⁴

The significance of Easter is that while it is an indulgence, it follows 40 days of abstinence during lent. Sweets as celebration have often been associated with different kinds of religious events. No Indian wedding is complete without Indian sweets or mithai.⁵ Sweets are a

global fixture during the Muslim adherence of Ramadan, when they are offered to guests through the night with tea or coffee or taken as gifts when visiting friends and relatives.⁶ The food industry is adapting to a new commercial climate, however there will always be the need for guilt-free pleasure, gifting and celebration. These cultural constants offer the food industry a chance to reframe the way that pleasure-based foods are consumed.

A market in flux

With one-in-six people consuming chocolate every day, the UK is one of the biggest per capita consumers of chocolate⁷ worldwide. Industry specialists are reporting a realigning of UK chocolate sales with 12 of Britain's best-selling chocolate brands reporting losses of around GBP 78 m over 2017⁸. Health-conscious Brits seem to be changing their eating habits, but they are not giving up on all types of chocolate.

Mainstream companies selling mass marketed products appear to be taking the hit, while high cocoa content artisan chocolatiers are seeing an upswing in sales. Smaller amounts of cocoa-rich, high-quality chocolate is attracting consumers away from mass-produced alternatives. Size also seems to matter. Upmarket supermarkets like Marks & Spencer and Waitrose now sell high-cocoa options in 30 gram to 35 gram bars, while artisan producers sell their product in micro-batches of 10 grams.⁹

One reason may be that the health message that moderate amounts of cocoa-rich dark chocolate is good for you seems to be reaching the consumer. While initiatives to improve public health are laudable and to be welcomed, it is important to remember that foods often associated with obesity, such as chocolate, actually have some well-established dietary benefits.¹⁰

Chocolate has historically received a bad press because of its high fat and sugar content. But there is growing evidence that the key ingredient in chocolate, cocoa, has a range of health benefits including preventing cognitive decline and reducing the risk of cardiovascular problems.

In 2014 the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) issued advice¹¹ that the consumption of 200 mg of cocoa flavanols daily was beneficial to health, in terms of improving blood flow. Flavanols are a dietary compound found in a number of plants like fruits and vegetables and that are also found in the cocoa plant.

Professor Richard Hurrell of the Institute of Food Nutrition and Health, ETH Zurich, an expert in the health benefits of chocolate, chaired the committee that requested the EFSA advice. According to Professor Hurrell: "I would propose that a small, dark, high quality chocolate (rich in

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cocoa flavanols) once or twice a day with coffee may be a health benefit, but that the regular daily consumption of high energy, high sugar chocolate bars and like candy bars, may be a health risk.”

The counter to these health claims is growing awareness around obesity. According to WHO figures¹² worldwide obesity levels have almost tripled since 1975 resulting in 1.9 billion adults over 18 being overweight with 650 million suffering from obesity.

The WHO is calling for reduced consumption of fats and sugars, increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and more exercise (60 minutes a day for children and 150 minutes a week for adults). One of the biggest culprits in this obesity epidemic is the consumption of sugary drinks.¹³ However, the finger is also being pointed at the availability of energy dense foods both high in sugar and fat. As a result, the food industry is being swept along in a public health tide as it faces the introduction of sugar taxes¹⁴, public health messaging and new labeling regimes that highlight the sugar, fat and salt content in foods.¹⁵

Another explanation for the rise in artisan chocolates is a change in consumer approach to pleasure and gifting. Our relationship with pleasure-based foods has always been evolving. It was not until the industrial revolution that the technology was in place to create solid chocolate, which then started to replace the chocolate drink as a pleasure source. Growing demand led to mass produced products that diverted away from the original cocoa and replaced it with alternative fats and sugars. Today, new public health pressures are requiring our relationship with chocolate to evolve once again.

The market in pleasure foods and chocolate is changing. This is nothing new, the history of chocolate consumption has been evolving over time and will continue to evolve as will attitudes to public health.

Conclusion

- The food industry needs to adapt to new market conditions as consumers develop rising awareness about obesity.
- Changing purchasing behavior is due in part to health concerns. Consumers are also more selective about pleasure-based foods, reserving the purchase as a “gift” to themselves or loved ones.
- Historically, consumption of pleasure-based foods has been a celebratory or religious indulgence rather than an everyday occurrence.
- We need to step away from the mass-produced, energy-based consumption of chocolates and sweets to seeing them more as a pleasure-based luxury.

At the heart of a call to action is the principle that the industry must be responsible in terms of calorie delivery, health and nutrition. To achieve this, producers must find a way to moderate consumption so that consumers see their product as a treat rather than as a regular energy source. Looking to the past may provide an answer as to how to best achieve this. The idea of sweets being an integral part of celebration and gifting has always been associated with moderation. It is the quality, not size of the gift that enthralls. The mass production and mass consumption of foods like chocolate to provide cheap accessible energy is a relatively new phenomenon.

Enjoyment and reward

The rise in sales of high-quality cocoa products and the falling sales of more mass-produced alternatives, is a return to associating chocolate with pleasure enjoyment and reward. A return to the principle of treasuring something that is exceptional. Celebration, gifting and pleasure are already recognized as key motivators for some consumers. Small packaged experiences in attractive wrappers are a significant portion of the chocolate market. Companies also brand these products as being consumed during occasions of celebration. New market conditions are going to require the industry to further embrace this approach.

Changing consumer behavior indicates there is already a shift towards smaller volumes of high-value products. Marketing and branding should reflect this market shift and portions need to be smaller, although the note of caution here is that it is unwise to just shrink an existing product. Smaller portions lead to an increase in packaging and must be balanced in the context of the growing concern of the use of plastic on the environment. We know that emotion is tied up with the experi-

ence of pleasure-based foods. Whether it is the idea of a gift on Valentine’s Day or Mother’s Day or a moment taken out of a busy day to indulge yourself, chocolate presents a mechanism for gifting to others and yourself. Branding and marketing could be more focused on the emotion of giving or the impulse indulgence by the way it is presented and packaged.

Reexamining the sustainability of packaging and being more transparent about the industry’s environmental impact provides one illustration of how this could be achieved. According to former Nestlé Corporate Nutritionist Dr. Edward Fern, packaging will be key to the food industry evolving its products, particularly in the chocolate sector. He argues that if companies wish to market indulgence, they will openly have to embrace all ecological concerns.

“Consumers will not see something as indulgent if they think it is ultimately going to cause environmental damage,” explains Dr. Fern. “So, the industry must primarily cut down on the use of plastic throughout the product range. It also needs to reduce water consumption, carbon footprints and negative ‘Fairtrade’ issues.”

He believes it is a mistake to apply solutions to these concerns only to the high-end of the market. “You need to start there but then steadily move across the whole range. The reason is that individuals who buy premium products are very often those who buy at the mass-market end as well since they don’t require exactly the same product quality on every purchasing occasion,” says Dr. Fern. The food industry has a responsibility to communicate to consumers through branding and marketing that pleasure based foods are about emotion and so should be consumed in moderation. Just as importantly this message needs to be aligned with sound environmental practice, reflected through greater industry transparency.

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Professor Richard Hurrell is an emeritus Professor of the Institute of Food Nutrition and Health in Zurich Switzerland. He studied nutrition at Cambridge University, UK, where he completed his PhD. In 1978 he joined the Nestle Research Centre, Lausanne, Switzerland and became head of the Micronutrient Research Team and the coordinator for Infant Nutrition Research, before joining ETH as Professor of Human Nutrition in 1994. At ETH, he was instrumental in transforming the Food Science Institute into the Institute of Food, Nutrition and Health. He was a board member of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition from 2002-2016. He chaired the Barry Callebaut Scientific Board when it made its recommendation to EFSA concerning the health benefits of chocolate rich in cocoa flavanols.

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Dr. Edward Fern obtained a PhD in Biochemistry from London University in 1975 and subsequently held positions at the Universities of Wisconsin (USA) and London (UK). He then joined Nestlé in Switzerland in 1981, initially at its Research Centre in Lausanne as Head of the Nutrition Department, and subsequently at the Global Headquarters in Vevey as Corporate Nutritionist in various marketing departments. His major research interest has always been the relationship between nutrition and health and in consumer perceptions of both. Currently he is happily retired in Switzerland after having spent almost 50 years involved in many aspects of food and nutrition, both scientific and commercial.

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