

Food Irradiation and Biotechnology Necessary to 'Protect Our People'

Culinary expert Julia Child needs little introduction to food enthusiasts around the world. Through her books, columns, television series, and teaching videos, Mrs. Child has acquainted a broad audience with "the way to cook." As an active member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals and the American Institute of Wine & Food, of which she is a founder, she has worked to advance the understanding, appreciation, and quality of wine and food and to further gastronomy as a discipline.

She was interviewed by managing editor Marjorie Mazel Hecht in January.

Question: How did you first learn of food irradiation and why have you supported it?

I heard about it first in the 1960s because the Bureau of Fisheries was experimenting with irradiation of fish. We visited the irradiation plant and had a long talk with the scientists running it. Then I didn't hear much at all about irradiation until about two years ago.

I think it's a tremendously interesting subject and something we should all know a great deal about because as our population swells, so does our pollution. A lot of foods harbor harmful bacteria which can be taken care of by irradiation.

You may remember the story of the melons that were stored on dirty ground and picked up salmonella on the outside, and a lot of people got very sick. That could have easily been taken care of by a mild irradiation dose on the outside, which wouldn't have hurt anything but the salmonella. The recent hamburger poisonings would have been avoided had the meat been irradiated.

Question: I think that the salmonella in meats and poultry, as well as other bacteria, are an increasing problem.



Julia Child: "I'm very concerned about all this fear of food."

Oh, terrible. Just about six weeks ago in New York City there was a ladies' box luncheon. There were about 300 of them there, and I think about 280 of them got salmonella poisoning and 10 of them were hospitalized. . . . That was done by a well-known catering company; the food was probably mishandled in the kitchen. I feel that any cases like that should be loudly publicized so that people will realize that they have got to be very careful and keep things refrigerated and keep things clean. . . .

I'm very much interested in this. We did a program on "Good Morning America" and we went out to the Westminster Egg farm in central Massachusetts, where they produce 30,000 dozen eggs a day—amazing. But they do it under ideal circumstances. (I'm sure the animal rights people think it's horrible to raise chickens in cages!) They feed and control them. Then the eggs go through a mild chlorine wash to take any bacteria off the shells. They are candled, studied for any kinds of

cracks, and then are boxed and refrigerated. Finally they are carried by refrigerated trucks to the market. What happens to them from the market on, we don't know. But anyway, I eat raw eggs all the time, but I know from where I buy them.

Question: Certainly eggs are one of the things they are looking at now for irradiation. The military has a program investigating this.

Yes. I talked with a scientist at the University of Rhode Island, and he was discussing the irradiation of fresh shell eggs. He was saying that they were able to eliminate the bacteria, but that the membrane around the yolk was more tender and the white a little more liquid. It is essential that we go into irradiation to protect our people.

Question: It's unfortunate that so many of today's chefs who are quoted in the media are afraid of technologies like biotechnology and irradiation.

I think it's lack of education. The

more you know about the science, the more ready you are to accept things and also respect scientists. I know with all this MSG [monosodium glutamate] controversy there's a little group in Santa Fe, New Mexico, who are very anti-MSG, and they say that you can't trust scientists because they "are in the pay of industry. . . . you can't believe scientists."

Well, that kind of attitude comes from people who are emotionally and intellectually immature.

Question: Yes—and who else would listen to the likes of Jeremy Rifkin. . . .

Well, he's in the pay of himself. He's definitely been thoroughly discredited by scientists as having no nutritional background whatsoever—he's neither a nutritionist nor a scientist.

I'm a great fan of Dr. Fred Stare [a nutritionist at the Harvard School of Public Health]; he's a no-nonsense man on these subjects. He was talking about chemicals in a recent article and he mentioned Rachel Carson, saying that she alerted everybody to the dangers of pesticides, but did a great deal of harm because she made people afraid of any pesticide. . . .

Question: 21st Century had an article in the Summer 1992 issue called "The Lies of Rachel Carson" that documents how she fudged, misstated, and in some cases just plain lied in order to overstate her case and to lead people down that path of fear of DDT and other pesticides.

I think that happens so much with people who are passionately for or against something. They lose a sense of proportion. They are so anxious to get their case over, very much like the animal rights people on veal, for instance. I happened to see a television show on that, and that was a lie. . . . They only show the worst example. . . . And then there was a show on shellfish and it made it sound as though if you ate shellfish, you'd be dead tomorrow. That's what they like to do, because people like to read horror stories about their food. . . .

Question: The first commercially licensed plant to irradiate food for sale in the United States opened last year in Florida. Other plants have existed but they have been for export or for re-

search. This plant has been ready to do poultry for a while, but the antinuclear group Food & Water Inc. has been pressuring—in fact, you could call it extortion—the poultry producers and distributors to try to force them not to accept irradiation. . . .

That's ridiculous. I think if anything exists, we should know everything about it. Whether it's irradiation or biotech, as long as it's there we should know every bit about it.

Question: To try to stop this plant, Food & Water actually had a radio campaign in Florida last year that said "Food irradiation might kill you."

But there's no scientific evidence for that. What are they getting out of it?

Question: I think that it's a money-making and name-making campaign for them in part. They have foundation grants and they have a certain following in the media, although their materials have been thoroughly discredited by scientists.

It's very hard to convince cultists about anything. . . . I'm very concerned about all this fear of food and people who don't dare eat anything. It's just a shame. As Dr. Fred Stare says: Eat anything, but in moderation, with great variety, and know what you are doing.

Question: I think the fear of food is a sickness really.

Yes, the table has become a trap rather than a pleasure.

Question: There was a study recently that showed that if food is unappealing, even if it has the correct nutrients, people will not take up those nutrients fully.

I think that one thing we should remember is that we were created with an appetite so that we would nourish ourselves and live.

Question: How would you compare the American diet today to the 1950s?

I think that in the 1950s, nutrition had not yet reared its ugly head. We were able to eat what we wanted and have a very good time. It's terribly useful now to have nutritional guidelines and particularly in limiting fat, which can be dangerous. But the limits are very liberal, and I think that nutritionists and scientists are very wrong in

dealing in the metric system, because immediately people turn off because they don't know it.

If you're talking about a 2,000-calorie day, for example, you're allowed one-third fat; that's around 600 calories. They would turn it into grams. But if you turn it into tablespoons, that would be 6 tablespoons of fat/oil, or 2 tablespoons of butter, and 4 of olive oil. That's a lot.

In the 1950s, nobody paid any attention to that. I think it's useful now that we have the guidelines, because a lot of people do overeat and just slather butter on things. That's very dangerous, as we know.

In the 1950s, of course, there were all those magazines with marshmallows and grapes in aspic, and fake cakes with high frostings. Now I think we're infinitely more sophisticated, and the fact that wine has entered the diet is a good thing. . . . And if anyone could do something about having a tasty tomato in December, it would be just marvelous. . . .

I was reading one article recently about irradiation, how big industry doesn't dare fight for it, and it's high time that they did. . . .

What's interesting I think is that the general public is very ill informed about what to eat. Mostly they are informed by television ads, and I don't know why they are so gullible about the food-fear-of-the-week, which they accept.

Question: I think it has to do with Rachel Carson. I think she really began a whole era of fear and she made people afraid of technology, afraid of chemicals.

She made them afraid of scientists. The general public became suspicious. . . .

You remember when microwave ovens first came out. There was a fear that the microwaves stayed in the food. We've got to get more information out on irradiation, and we should get the food companies to help us, because they've got the money. I think it's to their advantage to have produce that's better tasting and that will keep better. . . . And if we could get people like "60 Minutes" and "20/20" to go into it so that we really have TV information coming out that is true and correct. . . .