

# Health Elevations



A Quarterly Journal on  
Health Policy in Colorado

Fall 2014



## The Food Issue:

Can Public Policy  
Trim Bad Choices?

### **The Future of Food Help in America**

Or, how I learned to dread oatmeal and respect SNAP.

### **Supervillain or Super Scapegoat?**

Is sugar the right target for shaming?

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EVOLUTION OF  
THE HUMAN DIET



NUTS AND  
BERRIES...



INSECTS  
AND SMALL  
ANIMALS...



WILD  
ROOTS AND  
GRAINS...



FISH AND  
WILD  
GAME...



FRESH DAIRY, MEAT,  
FRUITS AND  
VEGETABLES...



DOUBLE-BACON  
CHEESEBURGER,  
FRIES, BIG GULP,  
DING-DONGS, HO-HO'S...



# Health Elevations



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Fall 2014

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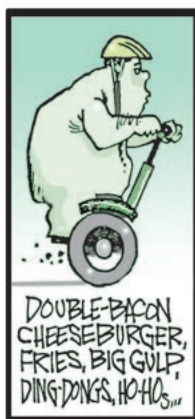
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VISIT [WWW.COLORADOHEALTH.ORG/JOURNAL](http://WWW.COLORADOHEALTH.ORG/JOURNAL) FOR THESE STORIES:

- Watch the town of Walsh gather at the grocery store for a story of preserving good health.
- View animation by Mike Keefe on the evolution, and devolution, of the human diet.
- Follow us on Twitter at @COHealthFDN and @MBoothdenver.

# About the Colorado Health Foundation

**HEALTH ELEVATIONS SEEKS** to further the goals of the Colorado Health Foundation by highlighting problems that can be solved, illuminating the people who are making progress in solving them and provoking a new way of looking at complex health issues. The journal will report on and synthesize a variety of sources to provide information that can further the work of policymakers, grantees, providers and the engaged public in advancing better health care, health coverage and healthier living. Useful information presented in a memorable way is indispensable to the complex field of health policy.

**THE COLORADO HEALTH FOUNDATION** works to make Colorado the healthiest state in the nation by ensuring that all Colorado kids are fit and healthy, and that all Coloradans achieve stable, affordable and adequate health coverage to improve their health with support from a network of primary health care and community services. To advance our mission, the Foundation engages the community through grantmaking, public policy, investing in evaluation, private sector initiatives and strategic communications. For more information, please visit [www.ColoradoHealth.org](http://www.ColoradoHealth.org).

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## Walking the Talk



# The Food Factor in Health

**F**ood is complicated.

A recent push among healthy living advocates has tried to equate “Big Food” with “Big Tobacco,” arguing that deceptive marketing of inherently unhealthy products damages consumers. The logical conclusion is that lawmakers should then do something about it.

There’s no doubt we have astronomically costly medical consequences from obesity, some of them caused by the foods we eat. To that point, parallels with the tobacco fight are clear.

Then it gets murky. We have to eat to survive. We never had to smoke to survive. Tobacco was optional, if highly addictive once the initial choice was made. Food as a concept is not optional – only the kinds of food we take in.

Food in our culture is survival; it’s also big business, personal fascination, gardeners’ and foodies’ obsession, holiday bonding, individual and group reward, family memory, ethnic culture, national pride ... the complexities go deeper and deeper.

So what do we act on in the massive arena of food and food policy, when we set goals of sharp reductions in child and adult obesity for Colorado? The Colorado Health Foundation has a stated goal with its partners of reducing childhood obesity to 10 percent by 2023, less than a decade away. What are the public policy levers we should try to push to help people reach that target?

This issue of *Health Elevations* is an exploration of food and nutrition policy and practice, and where it affects real people in Colorado. The SNAP/food stamp program feeds nearly one-tenth of the state. Does it provide enough food? Does it encourage the best kinds of food? What are the ethics of demanding “better” food behavior from those on public assistance?

Is sugar the biggest problem? Many cities and states are exploring a “sugar tax.” Is that the right lever? What makes sugar so special?

School nutrition will be a big fight in 2015, as powerful forces seek waivers from helpful nutrition standards launched in 2010. How are Colorado schools doing?

What can we learn about the nation’s largest repository of weight-loss information, based right here in Colorado? What implications does that knowledge have for public policy?

Is there really much choice in food for some communities? Or are we blaming individuals when we could be giving them more help through public policy efforts?

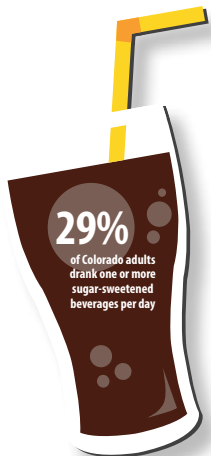
Down at the grocery store level, community-minded entrepreneurs are taking on the better-food fight in fascinating ways. Will it work? How will we evaluate what “It’s working!” really means?

We encourage you to read and engage, react and debate, jump up and jump in. There’s a food fight already raging – might as well grab some ideas and toss them into the fray.



*Anne Warhover*

Anne Warhover, President and CEO  
The Colorado Health Foundation  
@AnneWarhover



## “On Colorado’s Plate,” Pages 12-13, Is a Quick Look at What We Eat – and Probably Shouldn’t (sources listed below)

### Fruits and Vegetables

**Sources:** Adult fruit and vegetable consumption: 2013 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey. Child fruit and vegetable consumption: 2013 Colorado Child Health Survey.

**Notes:** The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment calculated the percentage of Colorado adults meeting age and gender recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s MyPlate ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)).

### Sugary Drinks

**Source:** 2013 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey.

**Notes:** The American Heart Association recommends that Americans consume no more than 450 calories (36 ounces) per week from sugar-sweetened beverages, based on a 2,000 calorie-per-day diet ([http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HealthyDietGoals/Frequently-Asked-Questions-About-Sugar\\_UCM\\_306725\\_Article.jsp](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HealthyDietGoals/Frequently-Asked-Questions-About-Sugar_UCM_306725_Article.jsp)).

### Kids and Fast Food

**Source:** 2010-2012 Colorado Child Health Survey.

**Notes:** Regional percentages were not tested for statistical significance against the state percentage.

### Affordability

**Source:** Adult affordability: 2013 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey. Parent affordability: 2013 Colorado Child Health Survey. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program enrollment: SNAP State Activity Report, Fiscal Year 2013.

**Notes:** Colorado’s fiscal year 2013 monthly SNAP participation was 507,000. The one-in-10 estimate is based on total population of 5 million.

# The Future of Food Help in America

By Michael Booth, Editor in Chief  
Photography by James Chance  
Illustration by Kevin Seitz

\$1.49



??



\$1.29



\$.19



\$.89



\$.69



??





# “Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed.”

Herman Melville

I've made plenty of those assumptions myself.

That's why it was long past time to take the SNAP Challenge. Eat for a week using only the same small allotment granted to the average food stamp recipient in Colorado – for me, about \$30, or \$1.45 a meal.

I assumed cheap food was plentiful and full of variety. I assumed it would be easy to avoid processed, boxed calories and buy fresh produce instead. I assumed that if I bought groceries ahead and had a rigid menu, I'd stop thinking about food all the time. I assumed coffee was in the budget.

Wrong.

Few things ruin the hearty taste of oatmeal like the knowledge you can't afford anything else for breakfast. Greens grow from dirt but they are not dirt cheap. And just because your menu is fixed doesn't mean you stop thinking about trades and upgrades – “If they'd just let me use five more dollars, I swear I'd buy broccoli and a bag of oranges.”

My experiences on a SNAP (food stamp) budget were merely annoying, and I'd never claim otherwise, in the face of nearly 50 million Americans and 500,000 Coloradans who rely on the food support program for much of their daily sustenance.

Choosing to eat cheaply is a luxury of the idle. Having to eat cheaply – because of unemployment, or health problems, or lack of education or a fair job – that is the grueling chore of more than a tenth of our population.

The reason the SNAP Challenge thrives is because it's a one-week seminar, massively open to everyone, held at the spot where public policy meets the public.

## SNAP Judgments

Robin Dickinson, MD, had her own set of assumptions before strokes and other setbacks put her family on food stamps two years ago. “You don't go into medical school thinking, ‘I'm going to need food stamps someday,’” said Dickinson, a practicing physician in Englewood.

Before her own illness, she would constantly advise unfortunate patients to seek out Medicaid, or to use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (the modern moniker for food stamps) to help the family get by for a while. She encouraged her patients to use the MyPlate nutrition plan to get healthier, eating half their food in fruits and vegetables. She thought people had time and interest and knowledge to cook healthy from scratch, starting with the SNAP benefits as a base.

Then the strokes hit, with two young children at home. She couldn't work a private practice job, having to sleep 20 hours a day to recover. Home and car repairs piled up. They canceled their family health insurance, even as the stroke bills piled up.

“We were down to eating rice and potatoes and oatmeal, and spicing it up with soy sauce until we ran out of soy sauce, Parmesan cheese until we ran out of Parmesan cheese, raisins until we ran out of raisins,” Dickinson said.

At one point she stepped back and re-examined all she had assumed about her poorest patients, even as she gave them good advice. “And I realized it had nothing to do with how hard we were trying, what kind of people we were. Our financial situation was terrible,” she said.

Feeling at the end of her rope, Dickinson called a human services agency, and after explaining her medical disability, was qualified for SNAP over the phone. She remembers vividly the joyful first day of using the unobtrusive Electronic Benefits Transfer card to get new groceries.

“The first time going in – after eating brown-bland food for so long – to get colorful, delicious, flavorful food was so exciting,” she said. “That was like a celebration day for us.”

## Budget Crumbs

Passage of a five-year U.S. farm bill in 2014 would seem to let SNAP proponents breathe easier for a while. Negotiators did manage to protect some basic levels of food assistance, despite an \$8 billion trim for some states (not Colorado) that had connected food assistance to home heating aid.

That does not mean advocates for the poor are sanguine. Food benefits are stuck at an average of about \$130 a month per person. Even that level is subject to political whim: If the fall 2014 elections result in a partisan shift in Washington, D.C., as most commentators assume it will, then Rep. Paul Ryan's summer poverty blueprint will receive more serious attention. The Wisconsin Republican, considered a conservative thought leader on social programs, has more strongly backed federal aid to the poor, but still wants much of it to be consolidated into the equivalent of block grants to the states.



\$2.49

??

\$.79

The libertarian Cato Institute in late 2013 issued a paper calling SNAP “a deeply troubled program. ... It has high administrative costs and significant levels of fraud and abuse. The program’s work requirements are weak and frequently evaded at the state level. The program increasingly breeds greater dependence on the government.”

Colorado, meanwhile, is still struggling to meet its own “SNAP Challenge.” The state had long suffered from poor participation rates, meaning hundreds of thousands of state residents were eligible for food aid but were not signed up because of notorious computer problems and a lack of coordinated outreach.

That has gotten better, but is far from a gold star. Statewide SNAP use rose to 508,000 people in fiscal year 2013, up from 252,933 in 2008, in part because of the faltering economy pushing more people into eligibility. But signups improved, too. Though state data lags the budget, 51.4 percent of eligible Coloradans got SNAP in 2011, up markedly from only 35.1 percent in 2008, according to the state Department of Human Services.

The participation gap fences off millions of dollars in economic activity from the Colorado economy – growers, producers and grocers would all be seeing revenue boosts if more eligible consumers received SNAP.

Anti-hunger advocates like Hunger Free Colorado will be carefully watching state and federal policies on SNAP, even as they gear up to protect school nutrition in the five-year reauthorization of that program up for debate in Congress in 2015.

Conservatives’ block-grant idea is a nonstarter, argued Hunger Free Colorado executive director Kathy Underhill.

“The whole point of SNAP is that it can expand and contract, counter-cyclically to the economy,” Underhill said. “So to hobble it that way” – through set amounts in block grants – “would be incredibly damaging.”

## **\$1.40 a Meal**

About the time I was talking macroeconomic policy, I also was spending time licking the peanut butter knives.

Underhill said there is no definitive way of knowing how many Coloradans rely on SNAP budgets for all of their food needs, but judging from the thousands of people her organization has interviewed over the years, the number is significant. So it’s not just a random exercise in budgeting to live on \$1.40 a meal: it’s walking in other people’s shoes.

If you haven’t had to budget very tightly lately, the grocery store looks something like this: The relatively nutritious foods that get you enough calories on SNAP come packaged in pasta cellophane; egg cartons; rice bags; cans of black beans; and in the child-centered packaging of peanut butter and raw oatmeal. You can afford enough apples and bananas to get you through half the week’s challenge; greens are nearly impossible, but for a sale on zucchini.

Bargains come in unexpected places, at least for those lucky enough to have a car to try more than one grocery store. Trader Joe’s takes EBT

cards, and has a jar of pasta sauce for \$1.29 that becomes a flavor-saver deep in the challenge week. Get to know your egg recipes – at \$5 for four dozen, they are hard to pass up.

Most of the working poor, or the poor looking to work, have little time to plan out the SNAP budget and cook from scratch for cheap nutrition. New York hunger activist Joel Berg has some choice words about that: “Michael Pollan has made a profound contribution to the food dialogue, but he has said poor people have more time than money and so they should spend more time preparing good food,” Berg said. “I don’t think that’s in touch with reality in America. Every hour they are preparing food is an hour they are not looking for a better job or taking care of their children. And they may spend two or three days in line waiting for benefits to which they are legally entitled.”

The business world likes to talk about “opportunity cost,” Berg said – the idea that productive people waste time in bureaucracy and thereby lose money. “The truth is low-income people are already the busiest people on the planet,” Berg said.

Anti-hunger and pro-nutrition advocates have come up with innovative tools. Colorado lawmakers this year passed a tax credit for farmers who donate healthy produce to food banks, which could supplement SNAP households with previously out-of-reach fruits and vegetables.

Leanne Brown wrote a cookbook for food budgets of \$4 a day, and used a Kickstarter campaign to jazz it up with beautiful food-porn shots of the menus. Her “Good and Cheap” became an Internet hit. I used it to make a “crustless quiche” – perhaps more realistically known as a frittata – with a kitchen sink of cheap zucchini, onions, garlic and cheese. For dinner – delicious; rolled up in a burrito for lunch the next day – almost as good, though the March of the Cheap Eggs seemed relentless.

## **Challenged by SNAP**

Cathy Kuo recalls those queasy moments from her own family’s SNAP Challenge.

Chief marketing officer of cable and Internet provider Wide Open West, Kuo is also on the board of Hunger Free Colorado. Her family agreed to do the challenge with her, pooling what SNAP would have given them to add a few extras.

She used cooking techniques learned from her Chinese mother to stretch a Costco roast chicken by using picked bones for broth and adding rice for soup. “We bought the cheapest soy sauce we could find and it was awful,” she remembered. They found some frozen vegetables that fit the budget, but nothing fresh.

“One of the apples we bought was bad, and that was devastating!” Kuo said.

The most surprising thing, she added, was the mental and emotional toll both she and her young daughter felt by the end of the week. She could see her daughter slumping and whining by Friday. For herself, Kuo said, “If you needed a critical decision from me, that was not the week for it. I was having difficulty thinking problems through.”



# Grocery Shopping's 'SNAP Decisions'

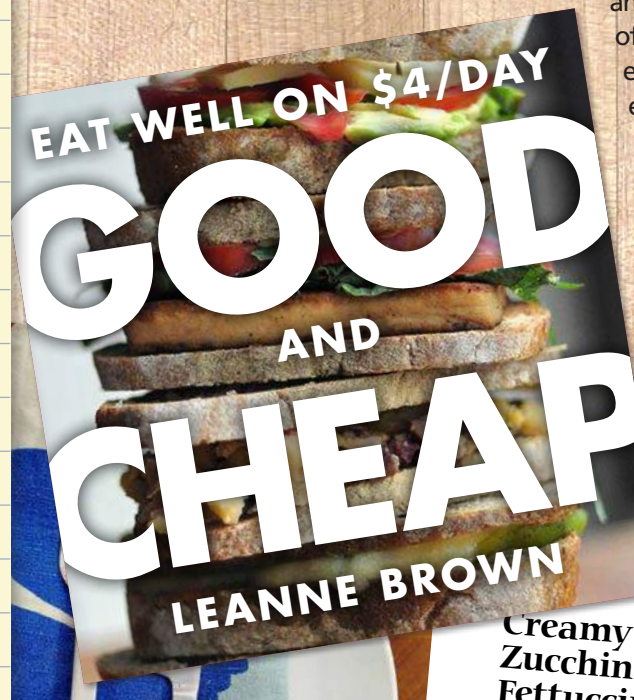
eggs-2 dzn. - \$2.50  
oatmeal - \$1.11  
tortillas - \$1.61  
peanut butter - \$2.11  
bread - \$.11  
bagels - \$2.11  
~~potatoes 5 lbs. - \$1.11~~ *sugar for tea?*  
pasta - 3 for \$1.00  
black beans - \$.11  
green chiles - \$1.31  
margarine stick - \$.25  
lemon - \$.50  
garlic - \$.50  
apples-5 - ~~\$2.00~~ *\$1.40 save \$.60*  
grape jelly - \$1.31  
tea - \$.60  
zucchini-2 - \$1.80  
cucumber - \$.81  
onion - \$.60  
cheese - \$1.11  
milk - ~~\$1.11~~ *\$1.31 save \$.60*  
bananas (4 or 5) - \$1.00  
ragn sauce - \$1.21  
~~TOTAL: \$36.03~~  
minuss potatoes? - \$34.03  
minuss cucumber? - \$33.10  
minuss half apples? - \$31.10  
minuss bread? - \$30.10  
+Trader Joe's Ragn? - \$1.21  
**\$31.31**

There are a million recipes and a hundred TV food shows for people who want to cook with truffle oil and swordfish, and have the time and the means to try it. But for the working-class American trying to stretch a dozen eggs through the end of the week when the next SNAP payment lands? Not so much.

At left, you'll see editor Michael Booth's attempt at creating a shopping list for a SNAP week that balances cheap eats with nutrition. It's a narrow path to travel, and often impossible. Food studies graduate student Leanne Brown recognized this, and decided on a project that could help the millions of families eating on a tight budget.

She put together nutritious recipes using relatively affordable ingredients, aimed at the individual SNAP budget of about \$4 a day. She added in plenty of chef-like advice about extra spices and visual touches that could fit in a budget,

and packaged it with the kind of beautiful food photos you'd expect in a Martha Stewart edition. A Kickstarter campaign is helping Brown publish the work, and she offers it for free as a download at [www.leannebrown.com](http://www.leannebrown.com). Cooks of all income levels can learn from her hard work.



## Dinner

My favorite meal of the day. For me, eating dinner indicates that the hard work is done: it's time for family, relaxing, and the more optional endeavors. A great dinner is an opportunity to show love to those you are cooking for and to yourself.

## Creamy Zucchini Fettuccine

FOR THREE

Zucchini and summer squash are so abundant in the summer months. This simple pasta is like a lighter, brighter fettuccine Alfredo. It also comes together in no time—the veggies will be ready by the time your pasta is cooked. You'll love it, I promise.

1/2 lb. fettuccine  
4 tbsp. butter  
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1/2 tsp. chili flakes  
2 small zucchinis, finely diced  
1 onion, zested

1/2 cup cream  
1/2 cup Romano or Parmesan, grated  
salt and pepper  
fresh basil, finely chopped (optional)

Bring a pot of water to boil over high heat. Salt the water liberally. This is how pasta gets salted, so don't be shy! Most won't end up in the pasta.

Cook the pasta according to the package directions. I prefer my pasta with some bite, so I drain the pasta just before it's finished so it doesn't get mushy when I add it to the vegetable pan to cook slightly more.

Meanwhile, melt a tablespoon of butter in a pan on medium heat. Add the garlic and chili flakes. Let them sizzle for 30 seconds to a minute, then add the zucchini. Stir the vegetables to coat them. Cook for 5 to 7 minutes, stirring occasionally, until some of the water has cooked off and the veggies are tender when stabbed with a fork. Young summer zucchini doesn't need much cooking. Add the lemon zest. Stir!

Drain the cooked fettuccine and add it to the zucchini pan along with the rest of the butter, the fettuccine around the pan to get everything ground pepper. Top with a bit more cheese and serve immediately.

\$2.50 TOTAL  
\$1.17 / SERVING

## Vegetable Quiche, Hold the Crust

FOR FOUR

Much as I love this quiche, but I like it even better cold out of the fridge the next day. It makes a great fast breakfast or lunch. The quiche in the picture uses broccoli, but you can make it with pretty much any kind of vegetable. Some of my favorites are roasted green chiles and cheddar, winter squash with goat cheese, zucchini and tomato, or spinach and olive.

1 tbsp. butter  
1 large onion, sliced into half moons  
2.4 cups chopped vegetables  
8 eggs  
1 cup milk  
1 cup cheddar or other cheese, grated  
1 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. black pepper

Set the oven to 400 °F.

There are two ways to make this quiche. If you have a cast-iron or other oven-proof skillet, you can make the quiche right in the skillet. This cuts down on dishes. Otherwise, start with a regular skillet and later transfer everything to a pie plate to bake.

Melt the butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add your onion slices and sprinkle a bit of salt and pepper over them. Cook the onions until they are golden brown and starting to caramelize. If your pan is oven-proof, simply remove it from the heat and spread the onions evenly across the bottom. Otherwise, butter a pie plate and scoop the onions into it, creating an even layer on the bottom. The onions add a crust-like texture and a bit of crunch.

A note on vegetables: For things like broccoli, cauliflower or winter squash, I suggest steaming or cooking them before adding them to the quiche to ensure they'll be fully cooked. For tomatoes, zucchini, spinach or any other quick-cooking vegetable, just use them fresh.

Spread the vegetables evenly over top of the onions. The dish or pan should look fairly full.

In a bowl, use a fork to lightly beat the eggs with the milk, cheese, salt, and pepper, just enough to break up the yolks and whites. This is a savory custard mixture. Pour the custard over the vegetables and onions and enjoy watching it fill in all the free spaces.

Bake the quiche in the oven for 1 hour. Once the surface is lightly browned all the way across, it's fully cooked.

Let the quiche cool for about 20 minutes, then slice into wedges and serve with a side salad.





## Cheap But Good

Sometimes the SNAP policy battles come down to a translucent raw chicken carcass sticking up out of a boiling pot.

Many of us seize up at the sight of a whole, raw chicken. Seems like a good idea, really, but where to start? So imagine the intimidation for a single working mom prepping dinner between shifts, with no clue where to start slicing.

Cooking Matters classes try to bring such useful knowledge to families struggling on tight food budgets around the state. Local chefs lead weekly courses in simple but delicious meals at extremely low cost. During downtime at a metro area meeting site, nutritionists from the Anschutz Medical Campus demonstrate the jaw-dropping high sugar levels in soda and other processed foods.

But getting busy families to turn out for the information is one of many frustrating moments for those reaching out to the working poor. On an early July night at Anschutz, four families had signed up, and 15 minutes in, only one family had shown up.

Chef Dennis Taylor ignored the small size of his audience, and focused on engaging three young children brought by Lori Tsosie of Green Valley Ranch. A whole fryer goes for 98 cents a pound, Taylor noted, while chicken breasts cut off the bone by someone else cost \$3.99 and up.

Taylor sliced off clammy chicken parts while the children alternated between shock and awe. He showed them how to blanch broccoli and carrots for 15 seconds before adding them to a chicken stir-fry to keep them fresher.

"So, you have to learn the value of unprepared food vs. prefabricated foods," he said.

Tsosie is trying, both on the budget issues and the better-nutrition issues. "I've been learning a lot about prices, and how much fat there is in some foods," she said. "We looked at how much lard is in a Whopper, and we were grossed out."

Tsosie said she has banned sugar drinks from her house, and because her young kids have already suffered through oral surgery, "They know why." She has been looking for alternatives – at Anschutz, the whole family sipped from ice water dotted with cucumber slices and mint leaves. "This is really good," Tsosie said.

## Ethics of Choice

Some families give up and head to the junk food aisles.

"If I'm a mom with three kids and you send me to the store with a buck, do I buy a plum, or three boxes of mac & cheese," Underhill said. She wasn't really asking a question.

Decrying the families buying soda and chips on SNAP's EBT cards is a favorite tactic of government-aid opponents. It's an easy target – in Los Angeles, neighborhood bodegas hang signs saying "All Rockstar Energy Drink Products are EBT Approved." A 16-ounce can of Rockstar holds 15 teaspoons of sugar in its caffeinated suspension.

These easy charges lead to dubious connections between SNAP and rising obesity. Isn't it ironic, critics like to say, that those receiving food aid are often the ones ingesting too many of the wrong calories?

A 2012 review called "SNAP to Health" by the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress said, "SNAP is a missed opportunity for improving children's nutrition and preventing obesity."

But the same center followed up with "The Facts and Fictions" of SNAP and obesity, pointing out with thorough research that the connection between public assistance and excess weight was blurry at best. Some respected studies show a bond with obesity; others show SNAP benefits increase dietary quality in a household.

What the center and other SNAP critiques have recommended is experimentation with dietary incentives or restrictions within SNAP benefits. Private money or public waivers could be used to increase incentives for fruits, vegetables and whole grains, for example. SNAP retailers might have to meet higher standards for what they stock, mixing more produce in with their processed foods. Some trials have shown willingness to spend SNAP on better foods when purchased in nutritionally designed food baskets. With Amazon and others diving into the grocery-delivery business, such private-public partnerships in nutrition have great potential.

Colorado has not seen strong state-level efforts to put nutrition incentives or restrictions into SNAP, said Hunger Free's Underhill. "People's purchasing habits are nearly identical, with or without SNAP," Underhill argued. There is an ethical danger in "the paternalism of eliminating that choice," she added.

New York's Berg put it more bluntly, on the idea of blocking certain popular foods for certain people: How can the U.S. government, for example,

Expert advice can make cooking economically taste good, too. Mariah Pimentel cooks pancakes with fresh ingredients with 11-year-old Carlos Marquez at a Cooking Matters class. At left, 6-year-old Ella Dumas works on the strawberries.







*Robin Dickinson, MD, who said SNAP aid got her family through hard times, gives some early advice to 3-week-old Rebekah Anne Khouri and her mother, Nacole.*

subsidize corn and corn-sweetened calories, then turn around and ban those food items for certain taxpayers?

“So unless it’s worse than heroin, and banned for everyone, it’s pretty selective to ban it for poor people in a public food program,” Berg concluded. “If it’s a public health threat, then ban it for everyone. Let’s not equate obesity with something wrong with the moral fiber of one economic group.”

Some SNAP critics and advocates do seem to agree on lesser steps, including more record-keeping and transparency in how SNAP money is spent, and where. The “SNAP to Health” report called for it, and food system writer Michele Simon demanded it more pointedly in her 2012 investigation, “Food Stamps: Follow the Money. Are Corporations Profiting from Hungry Americans?”

Simon’s critique estimated how many billions of dollars major brand names like Walmart, Coca-Cola and Kraft Foods, and bank processors like JPMorgan Chase make through SNAP purchases, and said they have worked against nutrition standards and transparency in the program.

The goal, Simon wrote, should be to “develop policies that ensure SNAP resources are used to reduce food insecurity and promote healthier diets, and not to subsidize the profits of the food industry or banks.”

## Sneaking Around SNAP

Of course you want to know if I cheated on the SNAP Challenge. And of course, I did. They ask you to keep the rules strict – don’t take free lunch offers from friends or family; don’t use your leftover \$8 bottle of arugula-infused, locally-sourced balsamic to make the chicken palatable; don’t walk your plate of rice over to the nearest Thai joint to “borrow” a dash of Sriracha.

Let’s just say my capacity for self-pity is much greater than my affinity for self-denial.

I was good in many places. I cooked salmon for a dinner party but had an egg and green chile burrito on my own plate. But I accepted a glass of wine and some fresh garden greens at a friend’s house, while bringing my own sad frittata. To make the undrinkable cheap tea go down better, I snuck some sugar packets from coffee shops. My wife and daughter lifted an extra dessert from a ladies-only 40th birthday party – it tasted like cream cheese and remorse.

Coffee was a tough loss – even the bad stuff was three times as much as cheap tea. Not sure if I’ve ever gone a week without java, since middle school.

Overall, I’d say I stuck to the spirit of the challenge. If my cheating items were worth some small change, I also had leftovers that would allow me to buy some variety in the next week. Two pounds of uncooked pasta, a dozen eggs, a small jar of peanut butter, some tortillas and cheese. The tea will be donated, though that in itself might be cruel.

There’s a separate question, of course: How did I do for vitamins and essentials? Man should not live on peanut butter alone, though many a third-grader has tried. I sent Anschutz nutritionist Jimikaye Beck my

weeklong SNAP menu – tantamount to asking Julia Child to critique a baloney sandwich.

She was kind, but tough. “There is a lack of vegetables in this diet.” Baby carrots could add a vegetable at lunch, she said; frozen broccoli could fit into the budget and nicely into the frittata. The broccoli would also replace some calcium she saw lacking.

Beck worried my cheap pasta was not whole-grain. (It wasn’t.) She wanted to know if I’d gotten the Jif knock-off peanut butter with all the sugar and salt, or something better. (Um ... no. Something likely worse.)

I argued back, no doubt irritated by deprivation of dessert, coffee and lettuce. Whole-grain pasta is three times the price! Upscale peanut butter is a rip-off (not to mention I happen to like Jif and its chemical clones).

Beck laughed in my face while pouring me a nice cucumber water. “Yes! Price is a challenge, isn’t it?”

Lesson learned.

## Shaking Off Stigma

Robin Dickinson’s family became ineligible for further SNAP benefits in August, she said, as her physical recovery allowed her to work more hours as a physician. She was happy for the progress, but also nervous about the transition without a food safety net.

“We’re going to creep over that cutoff, but that doesn’t mean all of a sudden we’re comfortable,” she said. Home and car repairs were put off, as they still had credit card debt. One broken down car could wipe out part of their monthly food plan.

She is more than ready, she said, to grocery shop without the stigma of other people’s judgments. She assumed she could guess what was going through other customers’ heads if they saw her swipe the EBT card over chocolate ice cream for her kids. Or if her cart included a cheap plastic toy as a reward to her special-needs son.

“They may not be thinking that, but it’s hard not to wonder,” Dickinson said. “I’m looking forward to going through that checkout line without worrying about it.” ●

# Lectures Alone Won't End This Food Battle

By Michael Booth

...  
“People in those environments don’t have the power of control ... .”  
...

Lori Dorfman

**W**hen it comes to the monumental task of changing Americans’ unhealthy diets, researcher Lori Dorfman likes to say, “Information is necessary but not sufficient.”

Few things make the point better than Dorfman’s favorite New Yorker cartoon. A doctor stands before a grieving, newly widowed woman in the intensive care unit’s waiting room. “I was able,” the doctor says unhelpfully, “to get in one last lecture about diet and exercise.”

Speaking to a full house at the 2014 Colorado Health Symposium at Keystone, Dorfman described the relentless fast-food messages consumers are bombarded with in her own Berkeley, Calif., and every other city in the country.

Doctors in Colorado towns bisected by highways and pockmarked by billboards have said the same thing: Right after leaving a doctor’s office lecture about high-fat, high-sugar foods, the patient will drive a road crammed with signs for Dairy Queen and Burger King and Dunkin’ Donuts and Pizza Hut.

“Education can’t compete,” argued Dorfman, who takes the proximity issue a step further: She shows a picture of a double-decker billboard – on top is an anti-obesity message from the California public health department; directly below it is a smiling woman holding bags from McDonald’s.

“The assumption is that we have an information gap, and if we just fill that gap, people will be healthier,” she added. Maybe the big idea shouldn’t be personal change, Dorfman said, but policy change.

The switch in point of view comes by recognizing that the problem is not an information gap, but a power gap, said Dorfman, a Ph.D. in public health who teaches communication at University of California, Berkeley’s School of Public Health. The burgeoning sugar-control movement at local and state levels across the country is in part a realization that advertising overwhelms consumer willpower. The modern citizen may need a civil intervention on his or her behalf to get breathing room to make better choices.



Thus the attempts at putting a “sugar tax” on sodas, flavored drinks and other snack foods; and New York City’s attempt to limit the size of such sodas in the Big Gulp era.

This new angle recognizes, Dorfman explained, that “people in those environments don’t have the power of control over that environment, and public policy can help them create and find that power.”

Until now, the message dominant for so long has been the one about personal responsibility and individual, inward-focused action, she said. “You are what you eat,” is the oldest example. People have gained too much weight because of bad choices, and if only they exercised more willpower – and exercised, period – then the problem would be solved.

It’s not that the old message is false, Dorfman noted. It’s just inadequate when competing daily against the mass marketing of appealing junk food.

*Messaging expert Lori Dorfman likes to show this billboard contradiction from a city streetscape.*

“Both of these can be true at once, and both of them are true at once,” she said. But we as a society are out of balance in how we tell stories about these things, she added. In addition to getting better information about eating and exercise choices, Dorfman said, it’s time for “consumers” to become “citizens” and to hear how public policy on nutrition and the built environment could bring more rapid change.

“It’s not either-or, but only one kind of story is getting told right now,” she said. •



# On Colorado's Plate:

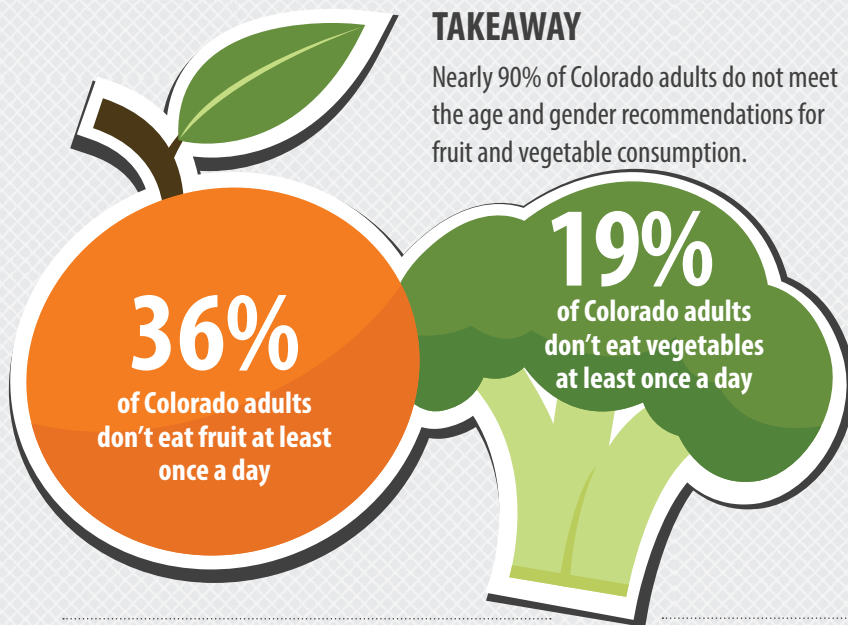
## Room for Healthier Habits

As Colorado strives to become the healthiest state, the daily intake of fruits, vegetables, fast food and sugary drinks becomes a key measure of success or failure. And the data show that there's much room for improvement. Most Coloradans do not eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. Many kids consume too much fast food, and a third of all adults drink too many sugary drinks. Many also struggle to afford nutritious foods for themselves or their children. Policies and programs that expand access to affordable, fresh food could help encourage healthier habits for all Coloradans.

### Fruits and Vegetables

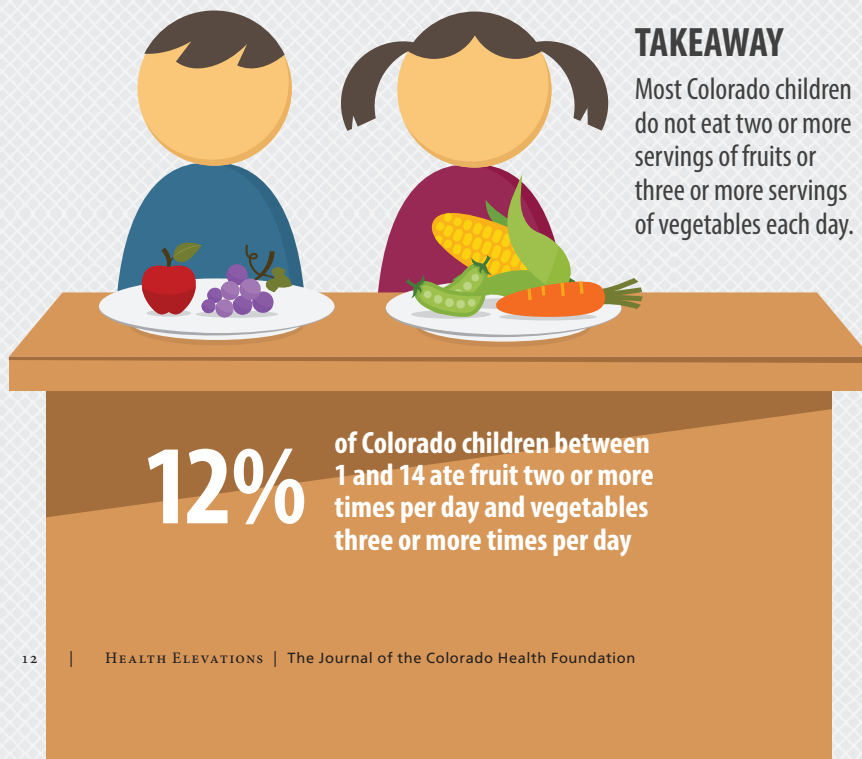
#### TAKEAWAY

Nearly 90% of Colorado adults do not meet the age and gender recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption.



#### TAKEAWAY

Most Colorado children do not eat two or more servings of fruits or three or more servings of vegetables each day.

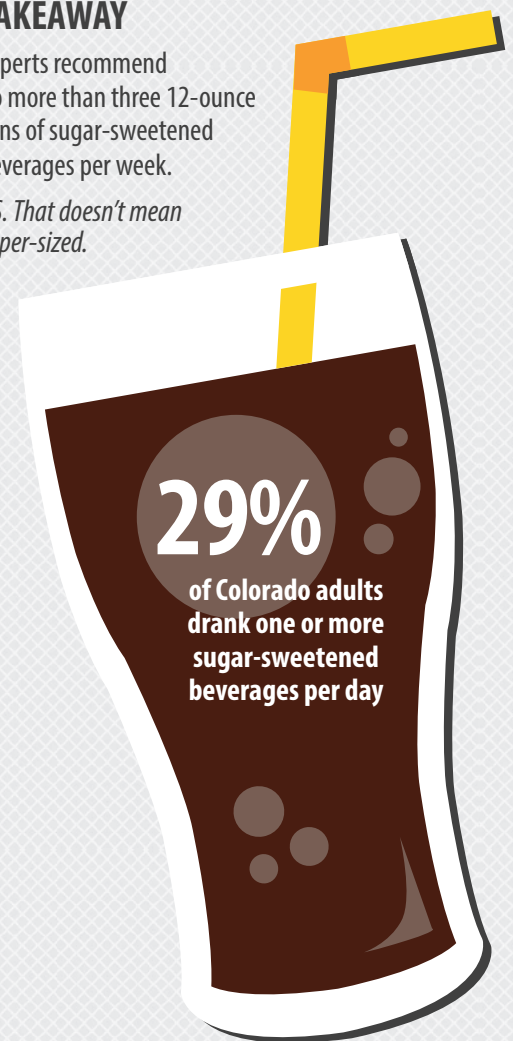


### Sugary Drinks

#### TAKEAWAY

Experts recommend no more than three 12-ounce cans of sugar-sweetened beverages per week.

*P.S. That doesn't mean super-sized.*

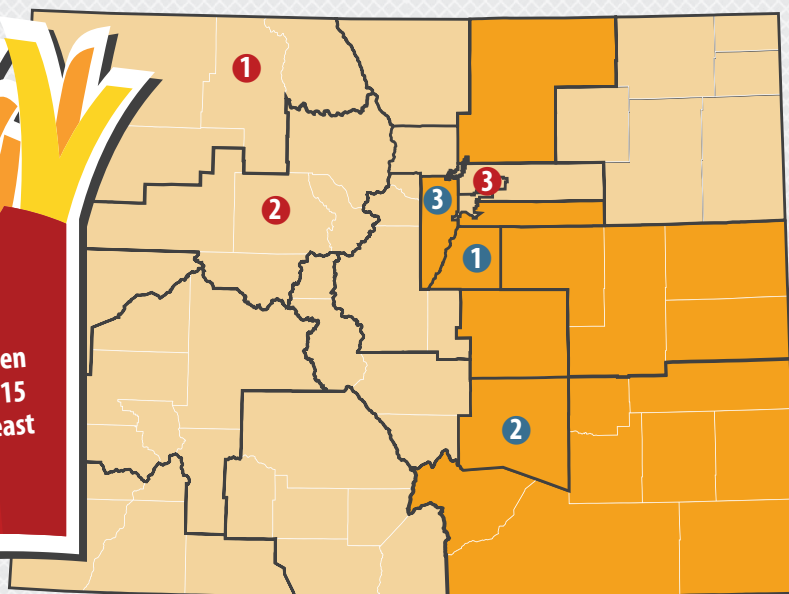
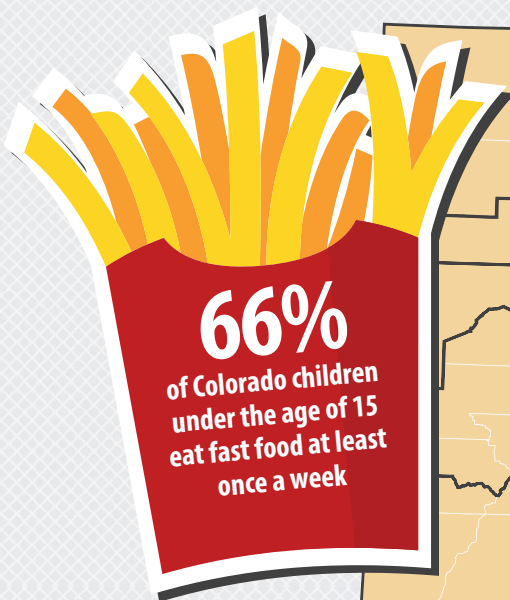


Data analysis by **Sara Schmitt** and **Tamara Keeney** and graphic by **Brian Clark** of the Colorado Health Institute.

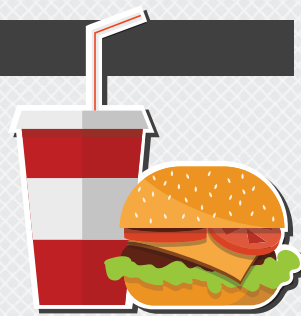
Note: Data sources and additional information provided on page 3.



## Kids and Fast Food



Comparing Regions  Below 66% State Average  Above 66% State Average



### THREE HIGHEST REGIONS

- 1 Douglas County 77.4%
- 2 Pueblo County 75.5%
- 3 Jefferson County 73.0%

### THREE LOWEST REGIONS

- 1 Jackson, Moffat, Rio Blanco and Routt counties 49.1%
- 2 Eagle, Garfield, Grand, Pitkin, Summit counties 50.8%
- 3 Denver County 53.6%

### TAKEAWAY

In 13 of the state's 21 Health Statistics Regions, the percentage of children eating fast food once or more a week is higher than the state average of 66%. Differences in fast food consumption can be influenced by many things, including family income and availability of fast food and grocery stores. (Note: Regions can be one county or multiple counties.)

## Affordability

### TAKEAWAY

1 in 4 Colorado adults say they are Always/Usually/Sometimes stressed about affording nutritious meals.



### More than 30%

of Colorado parents have relied on low-cost food to feed their children because they were running out of money to buy food.



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps lower-income Coloradans purchase healthy foods.

In 2013, about **1 in 10 Coloradans** participated in SNAP.

# The Limits of Public Policy & Nutrition

By Michael Booth  
Photography by James Chance

## A Candid Discussion with James Hill

Observations





**Editor's note:** Professor James O. Hill has a well-founded national reputation for reframing obesity, diet and exercise issues in layman's terms. Along with that comes dissent – some critics of “Big Food” portray Hill as working with the enemy when he advises major corporations like Disney on how to improve nutrition in their mass-consumer meals. Hill is ready to genially debate all comers, from his multiple posts as a professor of pediatrics and medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, executive director of the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center, and co-founder of the National Weight Control Registry, among other titles. This wide-ranging conversation with Michael Booth, on the role of public policy and the ethics of food rules, has been edited for length.

**Whether or not sugar calories are different from other calories, is sugar an opportunity for intervention because of the way the calorie is delivered in sugar-sweetened drinks? Because it gives us a focused place to do something about weight and obesity?**

Absolutely. In our weight management programs, one of the first things we tell people is don't drink your calories in beverages. I do not believe there is anything special about sugar, but I believe that's an opportunity to reduce calories, and reducing calories is a strategy we can use. We are big on either-or in this country; I still believe we still consume way too much dietary fat. We've known for a long time the best way to make rodents obese is to give them a diet that's high in sugar and high in fat. They overeat and they store it very efficiently. So we're doing that with humans, and we're focusing on one part of that – sugar. And I don't have a problem with that, but we also have to realize we are eating a diet that is high enough in fat that it reliably makes mice fat. So I think we have a problem with both sugar and fat.

**The “sugar delivery systems” out there are very identifiable, and sugar often comes in a package that I can set aside and say, I'm not going to drink that. Is there any equivalent of that in other calories?**

No, not so easily identified, and that's why it's OK to look at sugar-sweetened soda AMONG OTHER THINGS. But we eat and drink for other things besides health. I worry that by totally demonizing these things ... I might be a family out there in Aurora and maybe that's the only vice I can afford. Who are we to deny that, if having a Coke at the end of the day brings so much pleasure.

**The word “demonizing” – there are people who might buy an ice cream cone for their friends or their kids, but when they're handing it over, they'll joke and say, “This is so evil ...”**

I think we lose something if we go there. It's much more black and white if we just ban things. That's much easier in some ways than figuring out how they fit into the bigger picture. I don't think it's OK for every child to have three sodas a day or even one a day, but I do think it's OK under some circumstances to have a treat every now and then, especially if your kid is active. If you are physically active, you have a lot more room for fun in your diet.

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**“I don't think there's any diet on the planet that's going to allow people to be a healthy weight while sedentary. I think we have to get people moving to where their physiology is working well. Once we do that, then we can have some impact with diet.”**

James Hill

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**People are asking how much can be done by physical activity compared to diet reduction? How much have we learned about that in recent years?**

You can't even ask the question. It's like asking, is your net worth more due to your income or your spending? When you stop moving, you no longer handle food very well. So our population today that's largely overweight and obese, I don't think there's any diet on the planet that's going to allow people to be a healthy weight while sedentary. I think we have to get people moving to where their physiology is working well. Once we do that, then we can have some impact with diet.

**You've mentioned 70 minutes of exercise – how much of that is based on what you've learned from the successful dieters in the weight-loss registry? And could it be there's a higher number for exercise that's more ideal, but you had to find a more practical number?**

If you look at the people in the weight control registry, their average is about 60 minutes. We like to give people a day off, so we came up with 70 minutes six days a week rather than 60 minutes for seven days a week. And what we tell people is, this will get you in the ballpark of helping keep your weight off. Over time you may find you can get by with a little less or a little more, but we know if we get them up around an hour a day, they are in that range that will keep their metabolism working.



# Americans' Dietary Habits of Drinking Soda

Americans have become increasingly wary of drinking soda since Gallup began asking them about their dietary choices in 2002. At that time, only 41 percent said they actively tried to avoid soda, a percentage that has now jumped to 63 percent.

	Include	Avoid	Don't Think About
2014	23%	63%	13%
2004	25%	51%	24%
2002	36%	41%	23%

Source: Gallup

### You've done work dealing with major corporations and their policies making food. How has that been going in recent years?

I will give you one concrete example. I've been working with Walt Disney, and I'm not taking total credit for this, but we worked with them on nutritional guidelines and advertising throughout the whole company. At the theme parks, all the kids meals come with a default veggie and milk. Unless you ask for it, you'll get the good stuff. That's made a huge, huge difference without taking away the choice. That's the way a company can lead. I think it's the single biggest thing to improve kids' nutrition that I can think of in the past decade.

### Are there things you would advocate in public policy, such as a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages?

I'm not a big fan of taxes. I've talked to a lot of people who believe it won't have the intended effect. We had a guy here last week who carefully analyzed the Denmark "fat tax." The whole country decided it would tax saturated fat, every product. This thing lasted about a year and was repealed. It was a disaster because of several things. One, saturated fat intake didn't go down, so it didn't have the intended effect. Businesses felt at the end of the day they were harmed significantly. So businesses and consumers all said it wasn't working. If a tax is meant to discourage consumption, in the case of sodas, you have to increase it quite a bit to get a change in behavior. Or is it intended to raise dollars to go to some specific public health effort to reduce

obesity? The thing about taxes is that while they may start as one thing, they almost always end up in the general fund.

### Are there other things you'd be interested in pursuing, such as influencing corporations on food portion size?

All of that, yes. But one of the things we have to concentrate on is physical activity. Daily physical activity is decreasing substantially. How do we make that up with leisure activity when leisure activity hasn't increased in decades? You're not going to get people to exercise two more hours a day to make up for the decline in movement in daily life. And I believe that unless we get people active, we're not going to solve this problem. In the public arena we are focusing everything on sugar, and physical movement is almost an aside.

### Are any places in the United States trying anything at the state level?

I don't see a lot of states doing things that get me excited. You've got Mrs. Obama's thing, *Let's Move!*, and I'm not a critic of that; it's fine. I think it's far less than we're going to need to solve the problem. I don't see anything that's been scalable that gets me excited that would help turn the tide. I think we should do something statewide in Colorado, something innovative. I think Colorado should be the place that tries it. If every kid in Colorado came home every day having been active for an hour, we probably wouldn't be talking about a child obesity crisis. That's how important movement is.

### What do you think of some of the efforts to portray certain types of food as an addiction, the sugar-fat-salt point of view, implying secretive efforts to create an addiction?

We asked food companies to make food taste good. What tastes good? Sugar, fat, salt. You haven't got a lot of leeway on how to do it. What they've done over the years, they've been really good at giving us products that have sugar, fat, salt, and made them very inexpensive. If they would only give us food that tasted bad, we would solve this problem.

### Could they be working harder to create food that does taste good but is also better for you?

I guess I'm a capitalist at heart. If somebody's going to solve this problem, they're going to figure out how to make people healthy and make money. And I'm OK with that. •

• • •

**"If every kid in Colorado came home every day having been active for an hour, we probably wouldn't be talking about a child obesity crisis. That's how important movement is."**

James Hill

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# Walsh Grocery Co-Opts the Future

## While Other Colorado Stores Falter

By Michael Booth  
Photography by James Chance

**E**ight years in now with its bold experiment in food collectivism, the small southeastern plains town of Walsh can brag that it was doing the “shared economy” thing since before Uber was nada.

From the brink of losing its only grocery store in 2006, the Walsh Community Grocery Store has recovered to the point where mundane challenges are a sign of success. Cases in point: A hodgepodge of antiquated air conditioners were recently replaced for \$30,000, paid for with accumulated capital funds set aside from normal operations. A similar effort this year should help put to final rest a series of in-store freezers that generations of repairmen have kept running since 1951.

Other Colorado towns should consider sending ambassadors to Walsh for knowledge – a faltering chain of grocery stores put more towns like Akron and Walden at risk of losing their key shopping sites.

Advocates for rural health, economic development and community nutrition have happily applauded the success of Walsh’s community experiment. If the store had stayed closed after previous owners couldn’t make it in 2006, residents would have had to drive dozens of miles for the same produce, freshly butchered meat and other goods. The town of a few hundred would also have lost its primary hub for conversation, news, institutional supply – not to mention a physical goal for elderly residents who might otherwise stay home.



To restock the store and act as a down payment on economic development loans, hundreds of residents bought “shares” in the store for \$50 each. That buy-in also encouraged them to protect their investment through spending their food budgets at the store.

Instead of dwindling, the community spirit seems to build each year, according to store bookkeeper Helen Mills. The store’s customer appreciation day in 2014 served 368 hot dogs – in a town with a population of 400. Along the way, Walsh’s early push at collective impact has been profiled from *The Denver Post* to *USA Today*, from *People* magazine to National Public Radio.

Store managers have to be creative in a place where margins are so thin. “It’s tough when Walmart can sell it for cheaper than we can even buy it,” Mills said.

“It’s a game every week to know how much everybody wants of blueberries or strawberries. We don’t normally get turnips in, but if somebody wants some, we’ll buy a case and try to sell half a case to the nursing home,” she said. “If we have leftover peppers and onions in produce, we can chop them up and sell them at the butcher counter for fajita mix. Too many cucumbers left? We can use more of them in salads.”

The store also doesn’t hesitate to put responsibility on its customer-owners. If you’re planning on canning strawberry jam, store employees warn, don’t walk in and snatch up all 12 pints sitting on the produce shelves. “Let us know and we can order ahead so other people can have some, too,” Mills said. “If you need 100 hamburgers for a party, let us know and we’ll order extra beef. We have almost everyone trained now that if they need something, we can get it for them on Thursday’s delivery day.”

“We try to focus on healthy foods,” said board chair and local farmer Clarence Jones. “Gluten-free, sugar-free – if someone wants it we’ll try to get it. Senior Citizen Day is Wednesday, and we give a 10 percent discount – big box chains can’t do that. And the seniors love it – they save their list for Wednesday, and then they shop their drawers off, and it becomes a social hub. People are talking with each other.”

That positive drawing power of food – often neglected in society’s anxiety over obesity rates – has been proven over and over again in Walsh, residents said.

“It’s an essential part of the community,” Jones said of the store. “It’s been more of a success than we ever thought it would be. I didn’t even realize how important it was until we got deep into it.” •



Helen Mills helps run the Walsh store as a community center as much as a grocery outlet.

# Out of the kitchen, Into the cafeteria

## This School Food Fight Is Just Getting Started

By Michael Booth  
Photography by James Chance



It's an iconic, warmly-defended program bringing sustenance to the vulnerable who need it most: children at school who are happiest and perform best on a full stomach at breakfast and lunch.

It's also a massive, lucrative battleground for competing interests in nutrition, big business and ideology, spending \$16.5 billion a year to feed 32 million Americans a day.

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are up for debate in the coming year, as Congress ponders reauthorizing a centerpiece food security effort in place since just after World War II. (Also up for renewal are WIC, providing food support to women, infants and children, and other adult food programs.)

In Colorado, schools are also rushing to join the new opportunities of Breakfast After the Bell, which boosts breakfast funding this fall in hundreds of schools where 80 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

And the debate over the quality of school food will only get louder, as some schools join with Big Food companies to seek a rollback of 2012 nutrition guidelines, and the Obama administration proposes a strict new round of marketing regulations for unhealthy school snacks.

The future of seeing the Coke logo in schools, or glimpsing a salad on every lunch tray, is up in the air.

"We don't see it as either-or," said Cody Belzley, vice president of health initiatives for the Colorado Children's Campaign. "Kids need

food. And kids need healthy food. Given the political and economic climate, our primary focus is protecting what we have," Belzley said of school nutrition programs.

Studies have now shown a large number of students are getting half their daily calories at school.

That will be challenging enough for advocates and policymakers in 2015, with the battles heating up even before political negotiators dig into details of basic funding levels.

The U.S. House of Representatives has pushed forward a plan to give school districts waivers from the 2012 nutrition-improvement guidelines if they can claim hardship in meeting the rules. The School Nutrition Association, a prime voice for school district food providers in each state, is backing the waivers, with research claiming the guidelines led to wasted fruits and vegetables, a loss of vital paying students that balance subsidized students, and higher costs to purchase supplies.

"School cafeterias have struggled with rising costs, red tape and plate waste, threatening the long-term sustainability of school meal programs," according to an association handout that is also the official position of the group's Colorado branch.

In Colorado, Douglas County School District announced over the summer it would allow its high schools to waiver from the nutrition guidelines, saying the tough restrictions were costing sales in a mobile and relatively affluent student population with other

lunch options. The county said it was willing to lose the federal subsidy on those meals, but few other districts would find the option easy – Douglas County has a very low number of free and reduced-price student meals. (County officials also emphasized they had greatly improved their meal nutrition in the same direction as national guidelines, but were not willing to go as far as the mandate.)

Pueblo City Schools have found the tighter nutrition guidelines to be an "unfunded mandate," said Jill Kidd, director of nutrition services. For example, a small bump in federal reimbursement does not pay for the second serving of fruit required on breakfast trays, she said.

The older district kitchens are not well-adapted to scratch cooking, while ethnic groups don't all react the same way to new foods, she said. Whole-grain tortillas are sweeter and have an odd texture when dampened by food, turning off some traditional Hispanic families.

"If I had a wish for the reauthorization, it would be to go back to more targets and patterns for meals, and stop being so prescriptive," Kidd said.

Yet feelings within the association in Colorado are far from universal. Some of the larger school districts that jumped ahead of federal nutrition guidelines years ago with salad bars, more fruit items and a deep dive into scratch rather than processed foods, are happy with many of the changes.

"I don't think they should loosen the nutrition standards, and I know that probably puts me in bad company with other food service directors," said Theresa Hafner of Denver Public Schools, the largest district in the state with more than 80,000 enrolled and 50,000 eating daily lunch. "We're already able to meet it. What I don't want to see is a loosening on fruits and vegetables. We have a salad bar in every school and it's working; we have not seen an increase in food waste. If you give the kids the control, they'll make the good choices."

"We want the standards to stay in place," said Kathy Underhill, executive director of Hunger Free Colorado, a food security advocacy group.



Of districts seeking waivers from the tough guidelines, said Norwood Public Schools Food Service Director Sheila Henderson, “We’re not in that group at all!” After a sharp learning curve for staff and students, the Western Slope community learned to make creative adaptations with its budget and teach kids to embrace fresh foods.

Norwood has used U.S. Department of Agriculture commodity dollars to buy produce from a Department of Defense homegrown program, picked fruit at a Colorado State University extension orchard and loaded up on local Olathe sweet corn, among other moves. “We didn’t really have any dip” in student participation, she said.

Health advocates, however, won’t be up against just the House, or a Senate with a likelier more conservative mix come January. They are also wrestling with Big Food companies, from General Mills to Cargill to Hormel, and more, that have given strong financial support to the national School Nutrition Association, according to reporting by former Denver Post writer Allison Sherry, now chief of the Minneapolis Star Tribune’s Washington, D.C., bureau. The food companies in public have been neutral on the waivers, but with half its funding coming from food makers, the association has aggressively sought the rollback.

In Colorado, food security advocates are playing offense instead of defense. Underhill said that after the passage of Breakfast After the Bell, otherwise known as House Bill 13-1006, “We now have the most aggressive school breakfast legislation in the country.”

The bill requires all Colorado schools with 80 percent or more of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch to serve a free breakfast to all students beginning this fall. In fall of 2015, the program expands to schools with 70 percent or more free and reduced-price students; in the first year, the plan brings breakfast to more than 40,000 new students.

There is a cost to the state, but leveraging the federal dollars is minimal. The state expects to spend about \$170,000 on the first year of expansion, while the new meals bring in more than \$14 million in USDA reimbursement.

Though Denver already had breakfast in some schools, the initiative will bring nutritious morning meals to more than 100 of the district’s 160 school buildings, Hafner said. The district is trying to allow local principals as much control in the design as possible, whether they encourage a community breakfast with parents and siblings also coming to the cafeteria, a “grab-n-go” offering or food at the classroom desks. “We think they’re excited about the choices we’ve given them – we have a team going out to talk to each new school that is eligible,” Hafner said.

Each nutrition push takes creativity and repetition, she said. Some students used to packaged food and brand names at first resist the district’s scratch-cooked blueberry muffins or breakfast burritos. That can mean a crucial loss of revenue from a la carte buyers not receiving the meal subsidy.

“We give out samples and ask people to try it,” Hafner said. “You have to introduce foods a number of times before they’ll actually adopt it.”

Food security proponents have bigger goals, even as they play offense locally and defense nationally. They would love to see a bolstering of summer meals for kids, by expanding a pilot that moved beyond congregate meals served at a central community location. The pilots added \$30 to \$60 a month to the Electronic Benefits Transfer card for students on food assistance. That can greatly improve nutrition in Colorado’s dozens of rural and frontier counties, where traveling to a central site is a challenge, Underhill said.

That’s good as far as it goes, said Joel Berg, an outspoken liberal advocate with the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. But he’ll be seeking more from the 2015 school food reauthorization.

“We think it should be a bill moving towards ending hunger in America – it’s my opinion every school meal everywhere in America should be free, no matter of the income level,” Berg said. “And get a free breakfast meal as well.” ●



*Lifting nutrition levels: Elsa Porras, a Denver Public Schools food service manager, bakes fresh wheat buns at Centennial Elementary School.*

# Sugar

## SUPERVILLAIN? OR ALTER EGO?

By Jenny Deam

**W**hen doing battle, it is always easiest to have a singular, identifiable enemy.

These days the villain is sugar.

It's been called the new tobacco in its danger to public health. The on-ramp to obesity, not to mention diabetes, fatty liver disease, metabolic and insulin complications, and other medical and dental problems.

And suddenly there's a rush to combat the sticky public enemy with policy remedies dubbed practical or politicized, depending on the view. With billions in food spending and billions more in health care costs at stake, emotions run high.

"It is a life-or-death issue. Bullets are not the only thing killing African-American males," San Francisco Supervisor Malia Cohen told *The Associated Press* in July. That city's lawmakers have placed a 2-cent-per-ounce tax on sugary soft drinks on the November ballot. In nearby Berkeley, Calif., voters will decide whether to approve a 1-cent tax on beverages sweetened with sugar.

If the ballot measures pass, San Francisco and Berkeley would be the first cities to impose a direct tax on sugar consumption. A handful of states now impose a direct excise tax on sugary beverages, while others, including Colorado, either have removed the exemption of sales tax from such beverages or charge a higher sales tax than other food. Last year Mexico approved a 1-peso-per-liter tax on sugar-laden drinks and France imposed a similar measure in 2012.

While there is no current plan in Colorado to try to tax or regulate sugar on the state level, many are watching what happens in San Francisco and Berkeley to see what could be done on the local level, says Lisa Walvoord, vice president of policy and advocacy for LiveWell Colorado.

But is this really the way to solve the nation's obesity crisis?

And are soft drinks alone the cause of our woes?

"There is nothing new about this," sighed David Katz, MD, founding director of Yale University's Prevention Research Center and expert in both obesity and preventive medicine. "We always want to find that silver bullet. For years we were fixated on the amount of fat in our food; now it's sugar. This is a classic example of repeating the follies of history."



Still, Katz has no argument with the fact Americans need to curb their sweet tooth.

On average we consume 18 to 23 teaspoons of added sugar every day – or roughly a daily padding of 300 to 400 extra calories, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The American Heart Association advises no more than six teaspoons of added sugar per day for women and nine per day for men.

To put that in perspective, a typical 20-ounce bottle of nondiet soda pop contains about 16 teaspoons of sugar, usually from high-fructose corn syrup, and an added 240 calories. A 64-ounce Big Gulp can have up to 700 calories. By comparison, in the 1950s a soft drink bottle was 6.5 ounces. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the usual serving came in a 12-ounce can.

A generation ago, sugary drinks made up about 4 percent of the U.S. daily caloric intake. By the turn of the millennium it had risen to 9 percent, according to the Harvard School of Public Health.

Yet because of the way added sugar is absorbed quickly into the body, people do not feel as full as if they had eaten the same calories from solid food. And because it also stimulates appetite, despite all of those “empty calories” just added to their diet – and waistline – people typically do not compensate by subsequently eating less.

Still, as troublesome as sugary soft drinks are, there is some concern that targeting them alone in public policy is misguided – or at least incomplete.

In the 1990s, sugar-laden beverages were the leading source of added sugars and the single contributor of calories in American diet. But that is no longer the case. Now the majority of added sugar in our diet comes from food rather than beverages, according to a 2012 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data brief.

“Seventy-seven percent of all food is laced with added sugar,” said Robert Lustig, MD, a pediatric endocrinologist at the University of California – San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital and a nationally renowned expert on childhood obesity. He was recently featured in the documentary “Fed Up,” which accuses the multi-billion-dollar food and beverage industries of heaping massive amounts of added sugar into American diets – often in stealth, as added sugar comes under some 50 complex names.

“The assumption is if you are fat, it’s your fault,” Lustig said. But consumers are being tricked into thinking all calories behave the same, he said, especially when it comes to sugar.

Sugar is made up of two chemicals: glucose and fructose. Glucose is “the energy of life” and is necessary for the body. Eighty percent of glucose goes to the body’s organs such as the brain or heart, with only 20 percent going to the liver.

Not so with fructose. One hundred percent of fructose goes to the liver, where too much can contribute to health risks. The added sugars in our diet are laden with fructose.

Nutritionists said one of the biggest problems is most consumers cannot tell the difference between naturally occurring sugars in food – such as those in fruit or milk that are absorbed slowly and balanced against other nutrients – and the added sugar in diets coming as table sugar, honey, corn syrup or agave.

So how can we as a society limit something shown to be bad for us?

This is where nutrition scientists diverge, and the practicality of many policies is unproven.

Katz said he “prefers carrots to sticks.” He called going after a single nutrient through taxation or other means “idiotic.” He worries that if sugar is singled out, manufacturers will simply create low-sugar, high-fat food – not unlike in the past when fat was the target and food makers rolled out low-fat, high-sugar foods.

“If you use policy where policy is not the most effective approach, you actively arm the opposition,” Katz said, pointing to the cries of “nanny state” that came with former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s failed attempt to limit the sale of 16-ounce or larger sugary soft drinks.

Katz prefers his innovation called the NuVal scores, which gives healthier foods a higher “score” so consumers are looking at the bigger picture of overall nutrients and ingredients. He thinks it could be applied to SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, where recipients get more food for their dollar if they buy healthier.

But others say the deteriorating American health is too important not to take a public policy stand through regulation.

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**“Sugar is not solely responsible for all the health-related problems we are faced with. ... We have to recognize it is only one piece of the obesity and chronic disease puzzle.”**

*Jean Welsh, PhD, assistant professor of pediatric gastroenterology, Emory University School of Medicine*

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The Center for Science in the Public Interest, which supports excise taxes on sugary soft drinks in the short term, also has urged the Food and Drug Administration to force food and beverage makers to re-engineer their products over time to reduce sugar. The action mirrors the group’s mostly successful push to eliminate trans fat from food and the still pending effort to limit sodium levels.

A study in the American Journal of Agricultural Economics released in June suggests a tax per calorie rather than by volume would be more effective at curbing consumption.

A ballot measure in Telluride failed last year in the ski town’s bid to impose a 1-cent-per-ounce tax on sugary soda, sports and energy drinks, and on sweetened coffees and teas. Depending on the California outcome, similar initiatives could be resurrected in other communities, said Walvoord. She added that there is also interest in the state in replacing sweetened drinks and snacks in vending machines with healthier choices in places like hospitals, government buildings and recreation centers.

But Toby Smithson, a national spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, worries that attacking the wallet may not attack the problem. “If people want something, they will get it,” she said. “It’s our American way of thinking.”

Perhaps a better strategy is one of better labeling so consumers can see the difference between complex and added sugars, and educational campaigns to combat the onslaught of commercials for sugary foods, especially those aimed at children, said Jean Welsh, PhD, assistant professor of pediatric gastroenterology at the Emory University School of Medicine.

She discards the argument that American parents don’t want government interference in their children’s diets. “We don’t make free choices now because children are so influenced by advertisements,” she said.

Welsh also favors vending machines and workplace cafeterias stocked with less sugary fare.

“Sugar is not solely responsible for all the health-related problems we are faced with,” she said. “It does seem worthy to tackle in public health policy but we have to recognize it is only one piece of the obesity and chronic disease puzzle. Make good food cheaper – now that’s a good place to start.” •

# SECRETS OF THE DIET VAULT... IN PLAIN SIGHT

A national weight-loss registry based in Colorado holds clues to what public policy can and cannot do ... and how hard it is for humans to change.

By Joe Boven  
Photography by James Chance

**B**y the time Justin Jaramillo reached 393.4 pounds, his doctor had begun to worry about the effects of weight on his health. More importantly, so had Jaramillo's wife. So with high blood pressure and diabetes looming, Jaramillo decided it was time to make a change.

A football player in high school, Jaramillo graduated at 5'11" and 230 pounds. He was built for the sport he loved. However, after graduation he slacked off the exercise. And as he started the 9-to-5 lifestyle, lunch-hour hamburgers and french fries made up a high-fat diet that – coupled with a lack of exercise – eventually had him backed up against a high wall of weight.

"I was getting messages from the doctor that said, 'You know you are lucky that you haven't had any major issues,'" Jaramillo said. "They talk about clogged arteries. There was a point at my highest weight where they were worried about diabetes, and I had high blood pressure."

When his office put out a competitive weight-loss challenge, Jaramillo figured this was his chance to commit.

"I thought, 'Well, I was competitive back then and here is a chance to put money up, and there is a chance to win X amount of dollars.' So me and my wife said, 'Let's give it a shot,'" Jaramillo said.

Earlier this year, on the Monday after the Super Bowl, Jaramillo teamed up with a friend and began his battle toward a leaner self. In two weeks, he lost 20 to 30 pounds. And by the end of the 16-week contest, Jaramillo had lost 98.3 pounds more, scoring the most pounds lost in the men's category and winning the pot of cash. Since then he is down a total of 130 pounds, with a goal of 20 more to go.

"My relationships have strengthened [since then]. I was aware of my weight, and I was self-conscious. I would try to have short conversations and go back in my shell," Jaramillo said. "Now, I have more self-esteem, because I don't feel the shame. That is the most important thing to me. Hopefully other people notice that as well, because that makes me a better part of their life."

To lose the weight, Jaramillo didn't just diet, he changed his life. Following a weight-loss program designed by James O. Hill, PhD, director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and other researchers at the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center in Denver, Jaramillo began regularly exercising. He changed his eating habits from a high-fat diet to a regimen of five to six small meals a day, each packed with high-protein foods and organic vegetables.

He also tied many of his activities to important people in his life. He worked out with his wife and announced to those around him that he was working to take off the pounds. He bought a Fitbit to monitor his activity.

The "secrets" to Jaramillo's success can be found over and over again in the nation's premier "diet vault," the National Weight Control Registry launched 20 years ago by Hill and Rena Wing, PhD, of the Brown University Medical School. The registry "admits" adults who have lost 30 pounds or more and kept it off for over a year, no exceptions.

The prime tenets identified by the registry offer both insight into the potential of public policy to change American nutrition habits, and into the limits of outside pressures in changing human behavior.

Hill said the development of patterns of healthy behaviors have led many to control their weight for up to 30 years. Proponents of the registry believe those objectively measured lessons can serve others facing the same challenge. According to Hill, while weight loss and weight-loss maintenance behaviors differ widely, Jaramillo's progress mirrors what many registry participants do to keep their weight off.

Successful registry participants regularly get at least one hour of exercise a day. They monitor their weight and have a plan to address increases within a range, and they eat a high-carbohydrate, low-fat diet. They also tie their weight-loss routine to important parts of their life. Finally, while eating breakfast hasn't been shown to have a large effect on weight maintenance, Hill said that 98 percent of registry participants who have successfully maintained their weight made it a part of their regimen.





“My relationships have strengthened [since then]. I was aware of my weight, and I was self-conscious. Now, I have more self-esteem, because I don’t feel the shame. That is the most important thing to me. Hopefully other people notice that as well, because that makes me a better part of their life.”

*Justin Jaramillo*

However, Michael Schwartz, MD, director of the Diabetes and Obesity Center of Excellence at the University of Washington, is concerned that individuals like Jaramillo may be fighting a losing battle until further studies unveil deeper genetic secrets affecting weight maintenance. According to Schwartz, numerous studies have shown that less than 10 percent of obese individuals are able to keep off more than 5 percent of their body weight for longer than six months or a year.

Schwartz’s concerns come from a recent study published in *The Journal of Clinical Investigation* that he conducted on mice and humans, finding that a high fat diet appears to damage the portion of the brain that registers leptins, a hormone produced by fat cells.

The hypothalamus reads the number of leptins in a person’s bloodstream and uses that reading to regulate the amount of fat in the body and therefore body weight. However, Schwartz said that when most obese people begin to reduce body fat below 5 percent, the damaged hypothalamus misreads the total number of leptins and triggers a response to defend the individual’s current obese weight.

“Normal individuals maintain normal body weight over time because the system is working properly,” Schwartz said. “If you try to lose weight, whether you are a fat person or a lean person, you engage responses that become irresistible. You become more hungry. And in cases where a lot of weight is lost, you become sort of consumed or compelled to eat certain types of foods. And it becomes the dominant factor in your life.”

While Hill agreed with Schwartz’s findings, he believes that using the

lessons learned from the registry can help many individuals fight the body’s natural urge to defend its weight.

“Studies show that the people in the National Weight Control Registry have to do more to maintain their weight than a very similar person who has never been obese,” Hill said. “There is a penalty to pay for having been obese. That is not fair, but what we see is that people are actually able to overcome and compensate for that. ... [However] I think that these people have to maintain that lifestyle forever, and they are constantly at risk of regaining if they don’t”

Asked about how his study might help people looking to maintain their weight loss, Schwartz said that his takeaway was relatively simple: Do everything that you can to avoid becoming obese.

“It is important to recognize that highly processed, highly palatable, high-fat foods have trigger responses in our bodies that we didn’t really evolve to cope with,” Schwartz said.

While researchers continue to look into the physiological determinants of weight loss and maintenance, Jaramillo said he knows what he has to do to succeed.

“I know that I have a long road ahead of me,” he said. As a lifelong competitor focused on high-profile goals, his new target is earning a spot in the weight control registry.

“My long-term plan is to join that, as a special badge of honor. I am planning on being able to get there and be able to use those resources to stay on track.” ●

*Joe Boven is senior content manager at the Colorado Health Foundation.*



Mkale and Kwame Warner, owners of Good Eatin' butcher shop in Aurora.

# A Broad-Minded Butcher Shop

## HAS AMBITIONS WITH NUTRITION

By Michael Booth  
Photography by James Chance

**T**his past summer at their eclectic butcher shop in North Aurora, Mkale and Kwame Warner created a prayer box for submissions by customers.

It has proven wildly popular so far. Customers scribble out a note of hope for a relative or friend while the jazz music plays and the Warners bustle to package anything from bargain chicken breasts to oxtails.

And lately the Warners have been letting fly with a few prayers of their own. They are in the market for some added space, and some capital to build it out, that would propel their dreams of bringing healthier food to an entire neighborhood.

Their hopes will play out right here at Good Eatin', amid the aging, wheezing cold cases,

somewhere between the tiger shrimp and the St. Louis-cut ribs. The tirelessly upbeat Warners are ready for the challenge; their three years of hard work establishing a foothold in an economically mixed neighborhood have taught them they can't force what the customers will buy. But they believe there's an unmet demand for greens, fruits, potatoes, corn and the kind of cooking know-how that can turn a whole, uncut chicken into a healthy, bargain meal.

"The thing we appreciate about our business is the chance we get to hear our customers and be part of their lives," Kwame said. "We're making a difference. It's not just about the meat."

The Warners are accustomed to looking at their ventures with a mixture of cold numbers and warm optimism. Kwame was in the real estate business when the deep recession of 2008 sent the housing market spinning.

Searching for a new business, he combined his love of barbecue and cooking with advice from friends to try selling at farmers markets.

Later, a longtime butcher in their space on East Montview Boulevard retired, leaving ancient but workable meat cases and walk-in coolers. They took over the place and now every few months launch a new effort to reach out to a community of customers.

Their diverse customer base seeks everything from high-end steaks and lobster tails to boxes of bargain meats to be bought on Electronic Benefits Transfer cards, the debit-card system on which federal SNAP benefits now come. They like Goldstar hot links. Frog legs. Short ribs. Pork chops. Lean chicken. Rabbit meat.

They might listen to a class teaching brown rice is healthier than fried potatoes – they don't want to be dictated to, Kwame said. The Warners seek local farm sourcing for lean bison and free-range chicken, but they can't price their customers out of the market with a Tony's Market approach.

"My seafood supplier early on told me, 'Your customers will always tell you what they want. Get your own agenda off the table!'" he said. And he knows that while many activists seek a healthier neighborhood, Good Eatin' also has to sell enough to keep the doors open and pay off debt.

"What's missing big time is the produce factor: a healthy salad, a baked potato," Kwame said.

Mkale and Kwame know they can do better gently nudging buyers. They say they've seen far too many families go next door to the 7-Eleven and spend EBT money on "pizza, chips and soda, and call that dinner."



• • •

Their approach to finding expansion funds relies on the same faith and practical experience that allowed them to make it to three years.

"If your intention is clear, the resources will appear," is Mkale's life mantra.

Many states and communities have launched studies and plans to attack the "food desert" phenomenon. But the nonprofit community has also moved toward harder-nosed concepts like measurable results: Did the money spent move a clear problem toward an observable solution?

Whether customers buy new, healthier goods from an improved shop like the Warners' may be the simplest test. But outside evaluators would also wonder if customers were just replacing purchases made elsewhere, or if they had truly changed their habits.

Public health measures like obesity are attractive targets, but it's impossible to measure one store's impact on a large, mobile population.

**"The thing we appreciate about our business is the chance we get to hear our customers and be part of their lives. We're making a difference. It's not just about the meat."**

*Kwame Warner*

• • •

"The question of what success looks like is a good one, and I don't think we have a full understanding of that yet," said Kelci Price, director of research and evaluation for the Colorado Health Foundation.

"There's research showing that increasing access alone is not enough, and that shouldn't surprise us," Price said.

The Warners, meanwhile, will move ahead flushing out every corner of the physical and virtual neighborhood for more customers. On a recent Tuesday, a grandmother filled out a prayer card after chatting at length with Mkale, and declared, "Thank you, baby! I love y'all – you're definitely going to see me again."

Kwame smiles but goes back to his smartphone, where he's deploying an array of social media contacts to attract another generation. Facebook ads in news feeds, text-push reminders of loyalty credits waiting to be spent, prizes for families uploading video of their weekly slow-food dinners.

"Do we want a return on our investment? Yes," Kwame said, standing up to greet another customer looking for a whole case of grilling sausage. "But the way we want to build to that bottom line is a little different." •

Constant conversations with customers like Rene Whitmore, left, help the Warners balance their business and nutrition goals.



True Story



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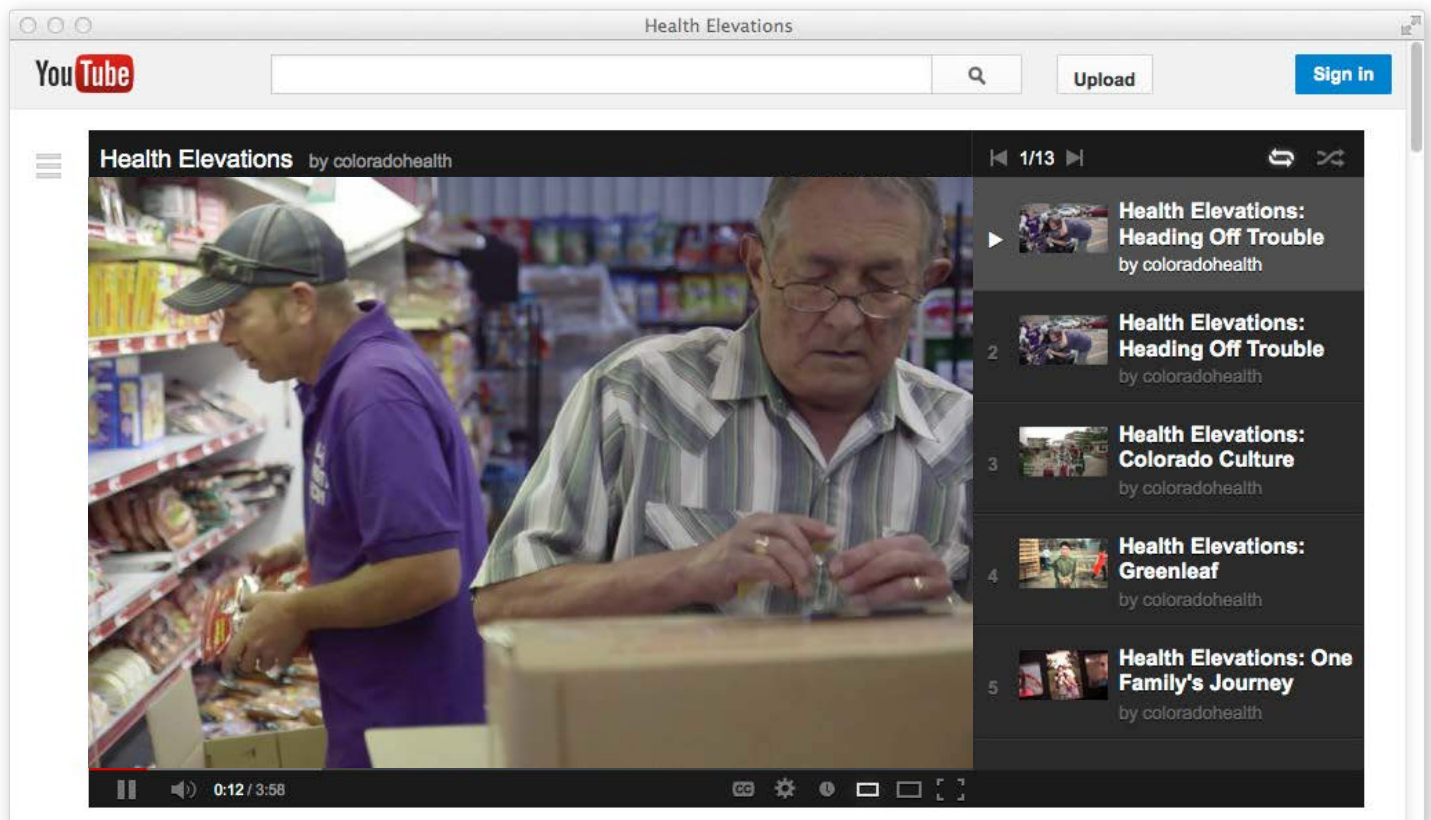
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# Visual Guide to the Food Issue

The small Eastern Plains town of Walsh knows firsthand what it's like to lose its food core – the death of the town grocery sparked the best kind of community uprising. Now what Walsh has learned about its main gathering place could teach other threatened towns how to use food as a catalyst for positive change. See this mini-documentary at [www.coloradohealth.org/journal](http://www.coloradohealth.org/journal).

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