



# THE ACCEPTABILITY OF FOOD AND THE CASE OF SUGAR

**We live in an era where food is subject to diktats and shifting fashions. One day the target is sugar, the next it is fats, often meat, more rarely alcohol. But with the huge growth in diets, nutritional advice, labelling and various colour codes, we no longer really know what we are eating, or what we should be eating! We are drifting towards a world where food has a utilitarian function based on uniformity, severity and restrictions – a world that wants to make food connoisseurs feel guilty.**

Birth, eating, sleep, reproduction, death – those are the parameters of life. Not all of them are unchanging. The purpose of “eating” remains constant, but its application varies with time. It can be visualised as a kind of pyramid, composed of three strata representing time periods of highly unequal duration. At the bottom, foraging and gathering: the essence of food, practised from time immemorial. In the centre, crop-growing and rearing of livestock: food was thus domesticated. This second phase covers the first known civilizations which go back 10,000 years, and dominated until the final decades of the 20th century. Suffice to say that these processes go right up to the

tip of the pyramid, leaving a small space for the third category, which is also the most recent (a few dozen years at most).

The third stratum, relating to “modern” nutrition, poses serious questions: is eating still fundamentally about “feeding” oneself? Is it about food or culture? Is diet a matter of personal discipline, the search for well-being, a guarantee of good health, or a fashion trend? In truth, it is a little bit of everything. But it is a chaotic, mixed-up phenomenon that lacks structure. For most people, they ingest more than they actually “eat” or taste. We feed, but where has the food gone?

## NUTRITION AND GOOD HEALTH: SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OR BALLPARK ASSESSMENT?

---

These days there is barely a magazine (particularly women's), newspaper, scientific journal or medical seminar that does not focus on healthy eating. Once again, we have seen profound evolution over time. A century ago, the main goal was to feed oneself, to fill one's stomach – in short, to avoid hunger. 50 years ago, two product groups were being stigmatised: sugar and fats. Finding a balance between carbohydrates, proteins and fats, limiting calorie intake depending on the body's needs, exercising, avoiding weight gain. Those were the "instructions" widely communicated and, most of the time, well understood.

For a few decades now, everything has become more complicated. First, we saw an endless lengthening of the list of "bad products": sugar and fats, followed by meat, bread, certain vegetables, starches, oilseed, nuts, etc. Strangely, alcohol has been spared. But in addition to getting longer, the list changes with the seasons, in line with the latest fads: high-protein diets, food-combining diets, high-calorie diets, vegetarianism, veganism, etc. In some, fat is banned; in others it is recommended. It can be zero-alcohol, a glass a day, or an occasional, moderate consumption. Who should you believe? And what should you do?

All of this is intended to put the consumer "on alert". Unless one lives outside of society, no individual can disregard the foundations of a healthy life and a balanced diet. But there have never been so many overweight people as there are today. Let's call a

spade a spade: there were always "fat people" in the past, but these days there are "obese people". The distinction is important as it indicates a worsening of the condition. While it is true that obesity sometimes results from genetic causes, it is most often the consequence of eating disorders and an overly sedentary lifestyle.

Here too, the response seems inappropriate. Instead of treating the causes, we seek to remedy the consequences. So we have seen the creation of a new range of products: hamburgers without meat, cakes without sugar, etc. The growing trend is to move away from the basic product by making various tweaks, alterations and additions to it.

As soon as the simple things are made complicated, that is when society starts to go backwards. And that is exactly what is happening with the noble and natural product known as sugar. Despite all the responses to anti-sugar attacks – recall the famous book "Pure, White and Deadly" by John Judkin – we still have to remind people of the basic principle: sugar is an essential nutrient in any balanced diet. There are three components to this balanced diet: the right amount of fats, carbohydrates and proteins; a stable balance between calories ingested and calories burnt; and a physically active lifestyle. In this equation, taste and well-being are vital. They must be managed responsibly. The correct use of sugar is also a question of education.

## SUGARING OR SWEETENING? A CLEAR HIJACKING OF TERMS

---

At the time when the European Single Market was being built (i.e. the late 1980's and early 1990's), directives known as "food legislation" were adopted in areas like labelling, packaging and lists of main ingredients.

In their collective wisdom, the Commission, European Parliament and Member States agreed on clear and simple labelling: calorie content (generally measured per 100g) and percentages of proteins, fats and carbohydrates. Progressively and discreetly, labels incorporated more and more information, reducing their legibility: to calories were added "kilojoules"; calorie content began to be expressed in "portions" rather than per 100g; and the list of product ingredients now includes the smallest additives and

colourings. The intention is laudable, but the reality is that labels are now unreadable.

And then there is the increased complexity of recipes, which creates confusion particularly with sugar. For the uninformed consumer, the word "sugar" covers any product intended to provide a sugary taste. In reality, the category of "sweeteners" consists of two distinct groups: natural sweeteners and artificial sweeteners. The natural ones, which we may call "calorific", are plentiful: sugar or sucrose extracted from the cane or beet; isoglucose; glucose; fructose (often extracted from maize); maltose; and xylitol (extracted from birch bark). Artificial sweeteners like Aspartame and Acesulfam-K have no calories.

So in light of this succinct classification, what are we talking about? Do so-called “sugar products” contain sugar (sucrose), glucose, Aspartame, or a mixture of all of these? Only the label can tell you – provided you are able to read it. To avoid overloading, the text has gotten too small to be read. As a result, we see the use of “colour codes”, which involves ranking the nutritional quality of a food product from red (the worst) to green (the best). The calorie content is the key criterion, without considering either the quantity ingested or the frequency of consumption. 50 grams of jam for breakfast: perfect. A whole jar in front of the TV: bad. But this is not taken into account.

The artificial nature of the assessment is exacerbated by other schemes made available to consumers via apps on their smartphones. Yuka, one of the best known, proposes “scanning food products to decipher their ingredients and evaluate their impact on your health.” The app BuyOrNot is based on the

same model, but it adds “an analysis of the product’s impact on the environment and animal welfare, and its manufacturing processes.” The concepts of balanced diet and hygiene are absent from all of these mechanisms. They have the effect of infantilising the consumer.

Sugar products are generally the big losers from Nutriscore and other colour codes. Combined with other factors, they end up convincing the public that sugar (sucrose) consumption is excessive. But nothing could be further from the truth. In Western Europe, sugar consumption has been stable for the past 30 years. In the United States, the country with the most obesity, levels are relatively low as they are supplemented by recurrent use of glucose and isoglucose. Thus, we see that the “sugar problem” in food should in fact be pluralised: sugar (sucrose) plus glucose, fructose, and so on.

## THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION SHOULD BE EDUCATING, NOT STIGMATISING

---

As we know, health is not one of the competences of the European Union. This does not mean, however, that the Commission cannot intervene in a debate as important as nutrition. But its approach appears to lack objectivity, and even relies on caricature.

The Commission’s “Cancer Plan” and “Plant-based Diet” have some positives. They affirm the fact that good health is most often based on a good diet, or rather a balanced diet. They also highlight the primary role of fresh fruit and vegetables. But otherwise, the Commission’s guidelines seem risky to me. Meat should be phased out of a more vegetarian diet given the environmental impact of the rearing process: cows apparently produce 13% of greenhouse gases! “Fats” are grouped under this generic title without any distinction between animal fats and vegetable fats, saturated or non-saturated. Meanwhile, sugar products are unfairly grouped under the generic term “sugars”. Alcohol, surprisingly, has not been attacked as much. What we have here is a cliché-based approach, the exact opposite of scientific rigour and the need to educate the consumer.

Like with the environment and other technical files such as taxonomy (the classification of investments according to their environmental quality), the Commission is promoting a punitive vision pleasing to Green NGOs but disconnected from economic and industrial realities.

The stronger the regulatory will is, the further bureaucracy extends its grip. The more burdensome regulation becomes, the less they are understood by their ultimate addressees – consumers. The reality is that food, in its individual form, has been eclipsed by processed products. Thanks to illegible labels and misleading colour codes, consumers are deprived of the benchmarks that once allowed them to exercise their own individual judgment and dietary choices. Sophisticated marketing, advertising, social media, obscure ingredients...it should all have been made simpler. Instead, it became more complex.





## SUGAR IS EMBLEMATIC, BUT IT IS ONLY THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Across every EU policy, we see a sharp rise in the power of civil society, i.e. consumer groups and Green NGOs. Thanks to their organisation, their specialisation and their mastery of communication and social media, they have carved out a dominant position and secured significant support within the Commission, the European Parliament and among Member States. By contrast, industry (and economic sectors more generally, including agriculture) are on the defensive. It is difficult these days for a European trade association to make itself heard by the EU Institutions. It is true for the Common Agricultural Policy, new plant breeding techniques, food legislation, the goal of free trade in the EU's commercial policy, and the issue of equivalence.

It is just as true for nutrition. With the word "sugar" arousing all kinds of hostility against it, the temptation for other natural sweeteners is to remain aloof from the disputes. As the proverb goes, a secret life is a happy life. But it is high time that we marshalled our forces. It is totally logical that producers of sugar and glucose should be in competition. But when it comes to food and nutrition, their interests are linked. The "every man for himself" approach needs

to be abandoned and replaced with an "all for one" mentality. Awareness-raising and communication actions must be developed jointly and implemented in a co-ordinated way.

The actions to be taken must prioritise two related themes: a return to a genuine understanding of nutritional issues with revamped labelling focussed on the essential, and a constant concern for promoting balanced diets. In doing so, consumer information will also be promoted – not deceptive information based on cliché, but information that educates and strengthens the consumer's freedom of choice.

The European Union devotes more than €100 million annually to promoting agricultural products. Viewed over several years, the total figures are considerable. But despite all the money spent, consumer understanding has deteriorated, as has the image of farmers in the eyes of the public. This is a serious failure. Only by directing a portion of this budget towards educational schemes regarding food, their nutritional quality and contribution to well-being can this bleak and discouraging state of affairs be remedied.



### MARIE-CHRISTINE RIBERA

Director General of CEFS  
THE ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN  
SUGAR MANUFACTURERS

268 avenue de Tervuren  
1150 Brussels - Belgium  
mariechristine.ribera@cefs.org  
www.cefs.org



The European Association of Sugar Manufacturers (or CEFS, French acronym standing for Comité Européen des Fabricants de Sucre) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1953 to represent the interests of the European sugar industry, vis-à-vis international institutions with a view to creating a positive regulatory climate for the sector in all its dimensions: production, competitiveness, nutrition and food legislation.

CEFS is an interlocutor recognized by the European Commission and participate, along with others, in the civil dialogue groups. CEFS' membership is composed of sugar-producing companies in the EU, the UK and Switzerland.

