To be fearful of food is part of the human condition, one result of what has been called the “omnivore’s dilemma.” This means that unlike, say, koala bears, who depend solely on eucalyptus leaves for their diet and cannot wander far away from where eucalyptus trees grow, our ability to eat a wide variety of foods has enabled us to roam the earth and survive almost anywhere on the planet. However, many potential foods can sicken or kill us, and the need to figure out which foods are dangerous and how to avoid them has resulted in a natural anxiety about food.¹

For most of human history, people passed on the knowledge of what to eat and what to avoid within the small group of hunter-gatherers in which they lived. However, the rise of the kind of agriculture that produced surpluses that could be stored over long periods of time led to the growth of towns and cities. This meant a constant widening of the gap between those who produced the food and those who consumed it. Transportation improvements steadily increased the number of people who handled and altered the foods—intermediaries who were, often quite rightly, regarded with suspicion. However, until the mid-nineteenth century, most people in North America were farmers or lived in small communities and either produced much of what they ate or had enough personal contact with those who produced it to assure themselves of its safety. Although food scares
were by no means unknown, they were mainly communicated through rumour, which kept them relatively restricted in scope.

In the United States and Canada, this situation changed dramatically in the late nineteenth century, when these countries were transformed by a wave of industrialization and urbanization. New railways spanned the continent, opening new areas in the West to large-scale grain production and ranching. In the East, the railways stretched their fingers inland, encouraging the growth of commercial farming to provide fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy products to the booming cities. Large steamships crowded the ports, unloading exotic foreign foods, such as bananas, for shipment by rail across the continent. Now, not only were many of the foods that were consumed by the people in the towns and cities not grown by neighbours: many of them were not even grown in neighbouring countries. Even more disturbing was the fact that most of the refining, milling, canning, salting, baking, and other ways of preserving food that had previously been done at home or by neighbours was now being done by large impersonal companies in facilities far from home. All along the way to the dinner table, these foods passed through the hands of any number of people who could profit by altering them, potentially to the detriment of their healthfulness and safety.

These technology-based fears were magnified by revolutions in two other fields: science and communications. In the late nineteenth century, scientists discovered that food consisted of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats, each of which played a crucial role in preserving health. Then, in the early twentieth century, vitamins were discovered. The use of “vita” in their name (rather than alternatives such as “accessory food substance”) associated them with life and vitality in the public mind, indicating that they were critical to survival. These crucial new food components all shared one feature: they were undetectable by laypeople—that is, they could not be seen, smelled, felt, or tasted. Only scientists, working with complex equipment and techniques in their laboratories, could detect how much of them foods contained and calculate how much had to be consumed to avoid disease, debility, and death. This meant that taste, the traditional warning sign of what was not fit to eat, was now the least reliable guide to safe eating (Levenstein [1988] 2003, 44–59).

A second barrel of the scientific blast was fired in the later nineteenth century by Louis Pasteur, the French scientist who discovered bacteria and
pioneered the “germ theory” of disease. His discovery that one species of these invisible killers infested milk, causing typhoid and other dreaded diseases, cast a pall over fresh milk. In the early 1900s, North American cities were swept by the realization that bacteria in their milk supplies were a prime cause of the attacks of diarrhea that killed many thousands of infants and children each year. Germs in other foods were then accused of causing a host of other deadly diseases—tuberculosis, diphtheria, smallpox, and so on—and frantic efforts were undertaken to get rid of them. Flies were now accused of being mobile germ carriers—“germs with wings.” In the United States, governments mounted “Swat the Fly” campaigns, which, among other things, rewarded schoolchildren with movie tickets for bringing buckets of dead flies to school (Levenstein 2012, 6–12).

Large-circulation women’s magazines, such as the venerable Ladies’ Home Journal and the upstart Good Housekeeping, warned Canadian and American housewives of the dangers posed by the germs lodged in the nooks and crannies of old-fashioned wooden kitchen tables and counters. Domestic science teachers in schools on both sides of the border scared children about the dire consequences of eating food prepared in kitchens that were not spotlessly clean. As a result, middle-class parents began furiously renovating hitherto neglected kitchen spaces, lining their floors with linoleum and installing enamel sinks, metal countertops, and spanning new white-painted cupboards (Gdula 2008, 11–15).

Meanwhile, late-nineteenth-century advances in chemistry produced new chemicals for preserving and altering food. Some of these were used as additives in the processes (such as canning) that spurred the industrialization of the food supply, and fears now arose that these chemicals were dangerous and possibly deadly. In the United States, the chemist Harvey W. Wiley, chief of the US government’s Bureau of Chemistry, led a campaign that culminated in the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which put his office in charge of preventing industry from using dangerous additives in processing foods. Fears that the new industrialized assembly line (or rather, disassembly line) method for slaughtering cattle was endangering the safety of the meat supply led to the simultaneous passage of the US federal Meat Inspection Act (Levenstein 2012, 43–78; Barkan 1985). The Canadian government then responded to Canadian concerns with an act providing for government supervision of meat inspection and canned foods (Derbyshire 2006, 542–43).
How were these new food fears communicated? Why did they have such a rapid and enormous impact? Much of the answer lies in the rise of an educated middle class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the development of new media devoted to influencing them. In the United States and English-speaking Canada, the rise of free public school education after the 1830s had made basic literacy the norm. The expansion of free secondary education in the 1880s and 1890s then helped create a critical mass of middle-class men and women capable of reading and comprehending written material at a quite sophisticated level. At the same time, advances in printing technology allowed the creation of mass-circulation newspapers and—crucial to the spread of food fears—a number of glossy, illustrated, large-circulation magazines, such as *McClure’s, Cosmopolitan,* and *Saturday Evening Post,* all competing for readership among this very literate middle class. In the early 1900s, these periodicals began vying for readers by having what we would call investigative journalists expose the untoward political, social, and environmental consequences that the surge in industrialization and urbanization was bringing to their middle-class readers’ lives. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt famously stuck the derisive label “muckrakers” on these reporters, yet that same year, he responded quickly when one of the most prominent of them, Upton Sinclair, came out with a series of magazine articles and a book, *The Jungle,* that chronicled the horrendous conditions in the Chicago stockyards where much of the nation’s meat was processed. The consequent uproar led Roosevelt to do a quick reversal and come out in support of the federal government meat inspection bill that the meat packers’ representatives had been successfully blocking in Congress (Kolko 1963, 101–6; Levenstein [1988] 2003, 38–39; Horowitz 2005, 27–33).

Although Sinclair, a socialist, claimed to have been primarily interested in the plight of the stockyard workers, his stories of what went on in the slaughterhouses were truly stomach churning—including dead rats and rat poison being ground into sausages. These stories spread like wildfire, not just across the nation but also internationally. His book, said the Toronto *Globe* in 1906, had “set the whole English-speaking world agog,” including, obviously, Canada (“Man of the Day,” *Globe* [Toronto], 10 November 1906). It would probably have been more accurate to suggest that it was articles about his book, in magazines and in newspapers like the *Globe,* that had set the world agog. As occurred in 1962, with the publication of
another book, by Rachel Carson (discussed below), many more people are likely to be influenced by reports of a sensational book’s findings than by the book itself.

One of the most interesting aspects of the brouhaha over Sinclair’s revelations was the way the meat-packers in the firing line handled the crisis, which contrasts quite sharply with the description that Charlene Elliott and Josh Greenberg (chapter 16, this volume) provide of how the packer XL Foods responded to a similar crisis in its Alberta slaughterhouse over one hundred years later. The Chicago packers quickly realized that the government could be their saviour rather than their adversary, and they threw their support behind the bill calling for regulation of the slaughterhouses. This ensured its passage, and henceforth, the entire progress of the animals through the killing and packing process was overseen by inspectors, paid by the government, who allowed government stamps guaranteeing their safety to be displayed prominently on all the products emerging from the plants. For the packers, it was hard to imagine a better way of assuaging public fears. They could now advertise, as Armour and Company did, that “the U.S. Inspection stamp, on every pound and every package of Armour goods, guarantees purity, wholesomeness, and honest labelling of all Armour food products.” As if this were not enough, to further reassure the public, the company threw open (carefully selected) parts of its facilities to the public (Levenstein [1988] 2003, 40–41). Other packers followed, and the slaughterhouses soon became one of the most popular tourist sites in Chicago; (Horowitz 2005, 59–60; see also Harper’s Magazine Advertiser, December 1909, 64).

A similar situation, minus the tourism, arose in Canada, where, in April 1907, Parliament passed the Meat and Canned Goods Act. As with the American system, government inspectors were posted in the slaughterhouses, and, once again, the packers supported the measure, seeing it as necessary not only to reassure the Canadian public but also to head off the British and European demands to ban imports of all North American meat—which stemmed from Sinclair’s exposé of the Chicago stockyards (Derbyshire 2006, 523–24).

Worries over the beef supply had actually burst on the scene some years earlier as a result of charges that newly created chemicals had been used to preserve the beef shipped to the American soldiers who invaded Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1898. Newspapers and magazines
were full of stories saying that the “embalmed beef” had killed more American soldiers than had the Spanish (“Who Is the Criminal?” cover illustration, *Harper’s Weekly*, 13 August 1898; Keuchel 1972, 251). This became part of a larger concern that food processors of all kinds were using dangerous new chemical additives to extend the shelf life of their foods. It was in response to this that Harvey Wiley demonstrated his great skill at grabbing headlines by gathering together a group of young government clerks in Washington and having them test the safety of these additives by having them dine each day on food laced with them. After an enterprising reporter labelled this experimental group the “Poison Squad,” the story was picked up by newspapers and magazines across the country. They even became the subject of vaudeville songs and skits. Ditties about them circulated far and wide. (One was recited in the recent TV series *Boardwalk Empire* [2010].) As it turned out, after four years, none of the squad’s rotating members experienced any untoward health effects, but no matter: the experiment gave governmental blessing to the idea that the new chemical additives could be dangerous (Levenstein 2012, 64–65).

The media hype about the “Poison Squad” and the “muckraking” magazine pieces warning of dangerous food additives played major roles in rallying support for the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. However, like that year’s meat inspection law, its passage also benefited from the support of the large processors it was supposed to regulate. In this case, H. J. Heinz, the largest processor of them all, managed to persuade a number of other giant processors that not only would government supervision of additives reassure the public that it was safe to eat their products; it would also rid the industry of the many small-scale producers who often used questionable additives to undercut large producers’ prices (Barkan 1985, 20–21). The addition of “Canned Foods” to the Canadian meat inspection act—resulting in the Meat and Canned Foods Act, passed in 1907—was intended to convey similar assurances, and the Canadian government agency tasked with inspecting canned goods adopted the standards used by the U.S. Bureau of Chemistry. As in the United States, the large canners were fully supportive of the new regulations (Ostry 2006, 16–17).

Government regulation of slaughterhouses and canned foods in Canada and the United States played major roles in reassuring the public about the food supply. Yet they also had a paradoxical effect, for their very existence raised public consciousness of the potential for danger inherent in the new
methods for processing foods. This awareness was often heightened by public officials seeking to demonstrate the importance of their roles as protectors of consumers’ health. For example, in the years following the 1906 passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in the United States, Harvey Wiley used his Bureau of Chemistry role in overseeing food additives to put himself constantly in the news, raising alarms about the potential dangers of any number of popular products, the most famous of which was Coca-Cola. He tried to force the company to state on the product’s labels that Coca-Cola was an addictive concoction because it contained cocaine (a not-yet-banned substance that it had not contained for many years) and, when that failed, because it contained caffeine, which he called more addictive than opium and cannabis (Washington Post, 17 December 1909; Coppin and High 1999, 144–45). Although he was unsuccessful on both counts, the ideas that cocaine is part of Coke’s secret formula and that Coke is addictive have persisted to the present day.

The food producers themselves—again, paradoxically—helped raise consciousness of the dangers of germs in food by promoting their brand names as guaranteeing the purity of their products. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Heinz built an international empire for its “57 Varieties” of processed food with advertisements showing them being processed by white-uniformed young women in immaculate facilities. Other companies exploited early-twentieth-century germophobia by trumpeting how their processing techniques protected their foods from dirty, germ-carrying hands. Gold Medal Flour declared, “The hands of the miller have not come into contact with the food at any stage of production.” Nabisco advertised that its biscuits were “touched only once by human hands—when the pretty girls pack them” (Tomes 1998, 169; Levenstein 2012, 12–19).

Another way of communicating that products were sanitary was through packaging, which, consumers were told, prevented germs from infesting their contents. Cardboard boxes were called “sanitary boxes”; Kellogg’s claimed in 1914 that its “Waxtite” packaging was endorsed by “48 state and municipal health authorities” (Levenstein 2012, 12–21). The implication in all of these campaigns was that their smaller competitors, who could not afford these measures, were selling impure, possibly dangerous foods. So successful were the large processors in associating their brand names with sanitation and purity that in the 1920s, when food processors
began the process of corporate takeovers and aggrandizement that continues to the present day, the most valuable objects of the takeovers were usually not the production facilities but the well-established brand names.

During the 1920s, another kind of food fear came to the fore: vitaminmania, or fear that a dearth of vitamins was ruining one’s health. After the first vitamins were discovered in the 1910s, each new discovery led to increasingly inflated claims for their importance in protecting against everything from the common cold and blindness to anxiety and depression. Food producers—such as citrus growers, milk producers, and flour millers—mounted expensive campaigns warning of the dire consequences that would result from not consuming enough of their products. Food processors mounted equally potent campaigns to reassure the public that not only did their processing techniques not deprive their foods of their vitamins, but they somehow enhanced their nutritional value. Again, the net result was to help raise—or rather, inflate—consumer fears about not getting enough vitamins. They succeeded in having my generation of young Canadians being forced to down large portions of acrid, supposedly strength-producing, canned spinach and also laid the basis for the huge surge in the consumption of vitamin pills that followed their introduction in the early 1940s (Levenstein, 2012, 79–94).

As was the case with the fears of germs and additives, vitamaniacs brought in heavy scientific artillery to support their claims (Apple 1996, 1–53). In the 1920s, America’s most famous vitamin researcher, Elmer McCollum, a professor at Johns Hopkins University who claimed to be the actual discoverer of vitamins, supplemented his academic salary by working for flour millers seeking to convince Americans that (contrary to what he had said earlier) white flour was nutritionally equal to whole wheat flour. Perhaps his most effective effort in this regard came when he appeared on nationwide radio broadcasts with a bevy of Hollywood stars who supplemented his nutritional message with testimonials to white bread’s efficacy in weight-loss diets. He then moved on to helping canners argue that canning had no effect on the vitamin content of food—statements that were duly reported in the daily press (Levenstein 2012, 96–106).

Reassurances of this kind played well in the print media during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, something that was probably not unconnected to the fact that advertising from food processors was now an important source of their income. The contrast with the heyday of the “muckrakers,”
when magazines carried few advertisements from food producers and relied mainly on circulation for profits, was marked. During the earlier period, as we have seen, press exposés of chicanery in the food industries played major roles in spurring the passage of meat inspection and pure food laws in the United States and Canada. In the 1930s, they played the opposite role. In 1933, after a couple of best-selling books and some articles in small progressive magazines exposed similar dangers in the meat- and food-processing industries, the US government proposed a new food and drug law to stiffen consumer protection. Many American magazines and newspapers responded to the pressure of corporate food advertisers, who were now very important to their bottom lines, by condemning the industry’s critics as communists and helping their allies in Congress to effectively gut the new act. Among the processors’ leading defenders were the *Ladies Home Journal*, which had been an important participant in the earlier crusade, and *Good Housekeeping* (Levenstein 2003, 17–18).

The 1940s and 1950s saw an explosion in the use of food additives. This was spurred on, first by defence needs and shortages during World War II and then by the postwar boom in family formation, suburbanization, and the consequent rise of once-a-week shopping, all of which created a huge market for “convenience” foods with longer shelf lives. Thanks to the toothless US legislation, food additives were subject to almost no government scrutiny, which was also the case in Canada, where the federal government still relied heavily on the United States for judgments about the safety of food additives. The result was what I have called “the golden age of food processing”: a time in which the media celebrated, rather than questioned, the dramatic changes that processors were effecting on the food supply (Levenstein 2003, 101).

During the 1960s, however, complacency about the heights to which the United States had risen was shattered by the rise of protest movements that began questioning its record on race relations, foreign policy, and economic equality. Big business became a favourite villain, and critics soon trained their guns on the giant food processors, whose new chemical preservatives and processing methods were now subjected to intense scrutiny. The result was a resurgence of fears of the chemicals and additives that they were using (Levenstein, 2003, 160–94).

In 1961, worries about the effects of pesticides on foods were spurred in the old-fashioned way, through a series of muckraking-style magazine
articles in the *New Yorker* in 1962 by Rachel Carson, subsequently published as the groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*. Pesticidal poisoning, she said, had gone beyond “the dreams of the Borgias.” She warned that “for the first time in history, every human being is subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals from the moment of conception until death” (Carson 1962, 13). Carson’s main target was DDT, a poison that had hitherto been hailed as a boon to mankind. Echoing President Theodore Roosevelt’s reaction to Upton Sinclair’s revelations about meat, President John F. Kennedy declared that he had been shocked by the *New Yorker* articles. Unlike Roosevelt, though, he was able to do little about it. Farmers and food producers managed to head off a ban for the next ten years (Levenstein 2003, 160–61).

One reason for their success was that most of the print media were still beholden to the food processors’ advertising. Carson’s methods, evidence, expertise, and conclusions were condemned by the likes of *Time, Saturday Evening Post, and Readers Digest*. “Our food scientists agree,” said a 1965 article in *McCall’s* magazine, “that without chemical additives . . . we would literally know famine” (Connif 1965, 83). However, network television news, newly expanded from fifteen-minute headline-reading to a more in-depth half-hour format, was hungry for sensational stories and not so dependent on food processors’ advertising. This probably explains why they picked up the cudgels with a series of reports recounting the dangers of pesticide residues on cranberries, apples, and other crops. In 1969, NBC-TV News caused a huge uproar by broadcasting an interview with a whistle-blowing Food and Drug Administration scientist, who described the horrifying malformations seen in chicks born of eggs injected with cyclamates, a widely used artificial sweetener. Dr. Arthur Schramm, head of the National Academy of Science’s Industry Liaison Committee, criticized the “economic terrorism” of the media, “particularly TV,” for publicizing studies of cyclamates and the flavour-enhancer MSG that disposed “a large majority of the lay public to draw dire conclusions.” Although the reports did indeed have dire effects on food producers, who were forced to abandon cyclamates and reduce the use of MSG, they were a boon to TV ratings, spurring the networks into digging up revelations about mercury in fish, botulism in pizza, pesticides in turkeys, arsenic in chickens, antibiotics in cheese, hormones in meat, salmonella in soup, and DDT in practically everything (Levenstein 2003, 172–73).
Exposés such as these helped lend credence to the wave of critical information about the food industries emerging from the “underground” or “alternative” news sources that began springing up in cities across Canada and the United States in the late 1960s. They cultivated the belief that it was the close connections between government, large corporations, and the mainstream media that had led to the Vietnam War, racism, pollution, and other outrages, including the degradation of the American diet. They were abetted by those involved in the so-called counterculture, who apotheosized the “natural,” denounced “plastic” white bread, and regarded practically any foods that were not brown as damaging to the health. Ultimately, it seemed, the only way to avoid big business’s depredations on the food supply was a do-it-yourself one, such as growing and eating organic foods. Consequently, the circulation of Organic Gardening and Farming, originally confined to a few thousand true believers, reached 650,000 in 1970 (Belasco 1989, 48–58; Levenstein 2003, 163).

Despite the TV networks’ earlier role in promoting scares about pesticides and chemical additives, they, along with the print media, were still accused of hiding information about the dangers of chemical additives at the behest of their corporate sponsors. The government, hitherto thought of as on the front lines in guarding the health of consumers, was now perceived by many to have joined the enemy ranks. In 1970, one of the research groups sponsored by the peripatetic critic Ralph Nader published The Chemical Feast, a sensational book condemning the US Food and Drug Administration for allowing the food supply to be laced with dangerous chemical additives (Turner 1970). Similar claims soon had a significant part of the population suspecting all mainstream advice—governmental and commercial—on the safety of additives and processing.

Processors deftly handled the resulting surge in demand for “natural” foods by relabelling and sometimes reconstituting their foods. There being no restrictions regarding the use of the term natural, almost any food and any ingredient could be labelled as such. By the mid-1970s, the shelves of supermarket aisles were full of foods such as “100% natural” cereals, potato chips, and even dog foods with “natural beef flavor” (Levenstein 2003, 198–200). As with the sanitary craze in the early years of the century, packaging was a major tool in communicating the message. In 1977, market researchers concluded that “natural” was the most convincing sales claim that could be put
on a food package. Among other favorites were “organic,” “no chemicals,” “pure,” “real,” and “no preservatives” (*New York Times*, 8 August 1977).

Meanwhile, the mainstream media were helping to promote lipophobia—fear of dietary fat—a new kind of food fear that, perhaps coincidentally, proved profitable to a number of their major advertisers. A powerful coalition of scientists, food processors, and charitable organizations coalesced to warn the public that eating foods containing saturated fats would elevate the amount of fat in their bloodstream and cause them to die prematurely of heart attacks. This idea originated in a flimsy scientific study that compared heart attack rates among some poor men in Naples, Italy, and some well-off businessmen in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and that linked the supposed “epidemic” of heart attacks among the Americans to an excess of saturated fats in their diets. The American Heart Association (AHA) seized on this “diet-heart theory” as a vehicle for redirecting its efforts from raising money for research—a long-term effort that was producing few noteworthy results—to telling people how to eat and urging them to make what we now call “lifestyle changes” (Levenstein 2012, 124–38).

Thanks, in part, to some advantageous political connections, the AHA and the scientists promoting the “diet-heart theory” soon gained enthusiastic support from the traditional media. The owners of *Time* magazine and the *New York Times* became actively engaged in raising funds to combat heart disease. They helped persuade Congress to funnel millions of dollars into the National Institutes of Health, a US government agency that quickly became the main source of funding for research into heart disease—money that, for the most part, went to scientists sympathetic to this theory. Meanwhile, the AHA used its campaign against saturated fats to create a “virtuous circle” in which its high-profile activities to inform the public on how to combat the “epidemic” raised money for more informational activities (as well as the hefty salaries of the professional fundraisers running the organization) that helped it promote itself even further as the leader of an assault on what it called “the nation’s number-one killer” (Levenstein 2012, 126–39).

On one level, the AHA communicated its message through activities organized by local chapters of the organization that were headed by professionals and staffed by volunteers, including highly successful efforts to encourage people whose loved ones had died of heart disease to have donations to the organization made in their memory. These were supplemented
by advertising campaigns to inform people of the dangers of saturated fats that helped the AHA to raise funds by giving the impression that the organization was in the forefront of bringing the “epidemic” to heel. Later, in the 1990s, the professionals came up with the idea of allowing companies to use—for a fee—an AHA (or in the case of Canada, Heart and Stroke Foundation) symbol in their advertising and packaging of foods that the organization certified as safe to eat (Levenstein 2012, 125–59).

Earlier, a number of food processors had begun playing a different, even more effective role in spreading lipophobia. They used the “diet-heart” theorists’ condemnations of saturated fats to promote their products as healthy alternatives to lard, butter, eggs, steak, and the other foods that were now labelled as deadly. Producers of polyunsaturated vegetable oils seized on some diet-heart science to promote these products as positively promoting healthier hearts, even convincing prominent nutritional scientists to recommend that they be drunk straight from the glass as “medication.” Nabisco claimed that eating a bowl of Shredded Wheat each morning would cut cholesterol levels and thereby prevent heart attacks and strokes (Levenstein 2012, 142–44). Most of these campaigns relied heavily on the print media, with ads in general interest and women’s magazines playing a prominent role. These would catch the attention of the main target audience: middle-class, middle-aged women worried about their husbands succumbing to the heart attack “epidemic.”

In scientific circles, the reign of the diet-heart theory and the fear of saturated fats that it promoted was crumbling rapidly by the early 2000s. The theory was undermined by discoveries that there were different kinds of saturated fat (some of which were said to be beneficial for the heart), challenges to the idea that more saturated fats in the diet increased the risk of heart disease, and the theory that the root cause of the illness was not fat but inflammation (Ridker et al. 2008). However, it still held sway in popular consciousness. That people who ate such things as Big Macs, fries, and shakes still said they were purchasing one-way tickets to the cardiac ward was testament to the power of the traditional media that had promoted this theory. However, at the same time, a host of other food fears swept the middle classes that seemed to have less to do with these media. The origins of the fears of the many people who are now convinced that they are allergic to, or at least “intolerant” of, gluten, lactose, nuts, and a host of other things are much more difficult to pin down. While an aversion to
saturated fats had the benediction of Time magazine, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and often one’s doctor, fear of gluten seems to have originated, in large part, in that amorphous thing called the “Web,” where, to many people, almost every source looks authoritative, especially if it is saying something you’d like to hear.

Where this will lead is anyone’s guess—hopefully not to the situation depicted in the recent *New Yorker* cartoon in which people sit around an empty Thanksgiving Dinner table, with each of them saying something like “I’m vegan,” “I’m lactose intolerant,” “I’m allergic to gluten,” and so on (*New Yorker*, 30 August 2012). It does make one long for the days when the mainstream media reported on Pasteur’s germ theory of disease and one could just go out and swat some flies.

NOTES

1 Michael Pollan popularized the term “the omnivore’s dilemma” in his book of that name, crediting the psychologist Paul Rozin for the phrase. It did appear first in Rozin’s work, and the concept’s many implications were explored in the work of the French social scientist Claude Fischler, who called it “the omnivore’s paradox” (Pollan 2006, 3; Rozin 1976, 21–25; Fischler 1990, 61).


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