

The Washington Post

Bringing Nutrition Home

USDA Expert Shares Focus on Food With His Wife the Chef

By Sally Squires
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, February 12, 2008

Some people eat to live. Others live to eat. But Brian Wansink takes that idea to a whole new level, where food permeates every part of his life.

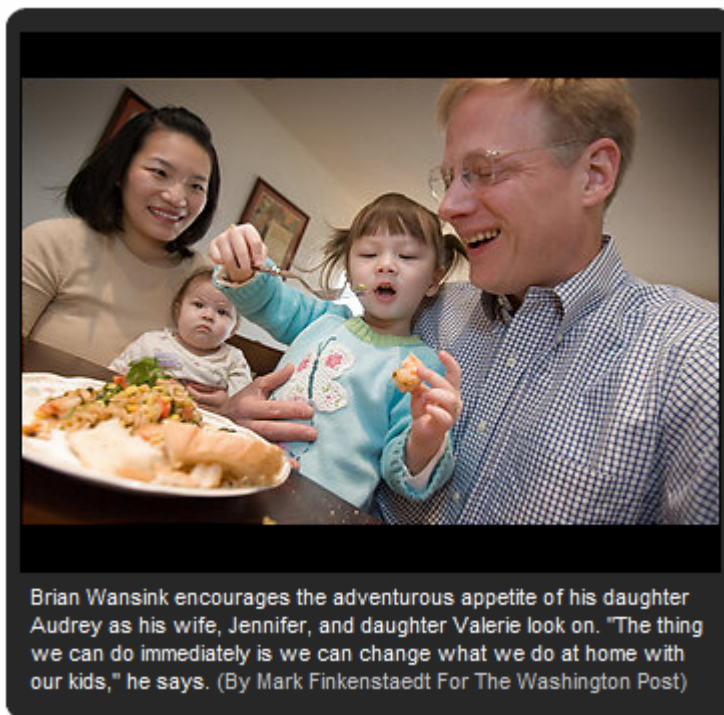
He's the best-selling author of "*Mindless Eating*," a critically acclaimed book about why we eat more than we think we do. As the new head of the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion at the Agriculture Department, he's about to help name the expert panel that will draft the *2010 Dietary Guidelines*, the nutritional blueprint for Americans. He's married to a Cordon Bleu-trained chef who fixes gourmet meals for him and their two young daughters. On weekends, he often heads back to Ithaca, N.Y., to oversee research at the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, where his findings helped inspire the 100-calorie snack pack.

Now he wants to recruit mothers to help him whittle the widening national girth. Project M.O.M. is a new USDA campaign that targets the nutritional gatekeepers in every household who call the shots on nourishment.

Society may have changed enormously in the past 50 years, but some things have not: Regardless of social status, income, education, the ability to cook from scratch or to find the closest fast-food restaurant with GPS, "the reality is that the bulk of purchases about food are done by mothers in the household," Wansink says.

Money for nutrition education at the USDA is tight. So Wansink plans to stretch those dollars: Rather than trying to "convince every person in the U.S. to eat better," he says, why not "get the nutritional gatekeeper . . . the one person who makes the decision" to change?

Predicting how consumers will react is something that Wansink has studied for nearly two decades. He earned his doctorate at Stanford in consumer behavior and holds a master's degree in mass communications from Drake University. He considered becoming a food journalist but decided academia was more to his taste.





His first book, "*Marketing Nutrition*," highlighted the many failures in getting the public to eat better. Among them: what he called the "embarrassing results" of the federal government's "expensive Five-A-Day for better health program," to get Americans to eat more fruit and vegetables. Most still fall short of those goals.

During the next year, Wansink will have an opportunity to test some of his own ideas. He and his boss at USDA -- Nancy Montanez Johner, undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services -- will be heading up the congressionally mandated five-year review of the dietary guidelines.

Assembling the expert panel of unpaid volunteers is often contentious. Consumer groups and the food industry vie to get

scientists who will promote their viewpoints to the committee.

Some say that the guidelines are updated too often. Others contend that they should be moved outside the purview of the federal departments that also implement them. In recent weeks, some critics have even suggested scrapping the guidelines, noting that it's pointless to offer nutrition information for "healthy" Americans when two-thirds are unhealthfully overweight.

Wansink sees it differently. "We need healthy targets just as we need grades in school," he says. With nutrition knowledge "just exploding," as he puts it, the guidelines, and the electronic food pyramid icon that highlights the dietary advice, can help consumers make sense of conflicting messages about what to eat.

"The beautiful thing about the *Dietary Guidelines*," he says, "is that it is an aggregate objective. It matters less whether you achieve it every day than if over a period of days you achieve it."

Wansink's appetite for understanding what people eat was shaped by boyhood summers on an Iowa corn farm owned by his uncle and aunt. "I sold a lot of fruit and vegetables door-to-door," he says. "Some people would say, 'Wow, 10 tomatoes for a dollar! I'll take all you have.' And other people would look at you like you had kryptonite. It got me interested in why some people feel that way."

In school, he discovered another Iowa native son, Herbert Hoover, the 31st U.S. president, who served as the first director of the former U.S. Food Administration, and oversaw the American effort to save Europe and parts of Russia from starvation after World War I.

In Hoover, Wansink found a lifelong idol. He keeps a small statue of Hoover in his office. The walls of his office and home are decorated with vintage Food Administration posters to remind him of bread lines of the Depression and food rationing in World War II, a sharp contrast from today's problems of overeating.

His career is like a complex meal laced with international flavors. Wansink came to the USDA from Cornell. His research is eclectic and varied, his papers as likely to be published in psychology and consumer marketing journals as in nutrition publications.

Wansink showed that moving the cash register from the end of the cafeteria line to the beginning can reduce what people eat. In an experiment with a bottomless soup bowl, he showed that consumers will disregard feeling full in favor of finishing what is served to them. He found that giving a dish a fancy name on a menu can satisfy consumers as much as a larger portion can.

Wansink has been on the faculty at the Wharton School, at Dartmouth, at Vrije University in Amsterdam, at the Army Research Institute, at INSEAD (a graduate business school in France) and at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. That's where he met his Taiwanese-born wife, Jennifer, who was getting her MBA.

After marrying, they spent his sabbatical year in Paris, where he began to write "Mindless Eating" and she entered the Cordon Bleu. (As Wansink proudly notes, she finished third in her class.)

These days, Jennifer Wansink is one of those nutritional gatekeepers that her husband is targeting. Her cooking, she says, is now mostly limited to fixing meals for her husband and their two daughters, Audrey, 2, and Valerie, 6 months.

Valerie is just starting solid food. Audrey is already an adventurous eater, with tastes ranging from caviar to liver, according to her mother. During a recent family lunch at their apartment in Alexandria, Audrey eagerly ate an elegant salad her mother had prepared with soy pasta, shrimp and edamame, flavored with balsamic vinegar and spicy hot sauce, and accompanied by a slice of toasted garlic bread.

Watching his preschooler savor food gives Wansink great pleasure. Audrey was underweight when she was born and struggled to attain a healthy weight.

That experience has taught him how the innate parental desire to nourish a child can backfire. "To some extent, I lose sight as to what it is that she just ate," he says. "All I know is that she took 25 bites. . . . That is cause for tremendous celebration."

But then the concerned father retreats and the nutrition marketing professor, food expert and USDA official emerges. "I can easily see how it would lead a parent to feed a child anything just so that they will eat. . . . It's given me a lot more sympathy [for parents]."

He knows firsthand that the problem is far-reaching but believes the solutions to the nation's obesity epidemic begin with the family. As he says, "The thing we can do immediately is we can change what we do at home with our kids."

Given the short time he has -- his job ends Jan. 21, 2009, when the next administration begins -- Wansink is not wasting any time. To streamline his life, he rented an apartment for his family within walking distance of his office. He works out several times daily by using the stairs at his apartment building (nine flights up and down) and at USDA headquarters (10 flights). He joins his family for lunch when he can.

"When you know the date you are going to be fired," Wansink says, you get very focused. "I can sleep for the next six months when this is over."