

# World Nutrition

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### **The big issue is ultra-processing**

## *Letters*

### **Bread: give us this day – or not?**

### **Nostalgia for time gone by**

Sir: The letter from Lluís Serra-Majem, in response to the commentary by Carlos Monteiro about ultra-processed products, is based more on nostalgia than on scientific evidence. The fact that bread has been the subject of numerous treatises, and has been fundamental to many cultures, says little about its effects on health.

Another scientific and medical point of view, is that bread is a major source of concentrated carbohydrates with a high glycaemic index, is a provider of allergenic proteins (judging by the increasing prevalence of coeliac disease), and also of phytic acid (a calcium and iron sequestrant).

Bread very possibly has been important for health in earlier stages of humanity, by providing energy and stimulating insulin secretion. It is not very sensible to discuss whether bread is good or bad in isolation and out of context. The real issues include,

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whether it has harmony with the other foods consumed in any diet, with human needs, and with the environment.

Nostalgic memories of pleasant flavours and combinations of bread on the table of our grandparents are part of the heritage of some of us, but are not a scientific point of the type at issue here. Those lucky enough to taste delicious bread with garlic, tomatoes and salt soaked in olive oil, or bread dipped in wine and sugar, by travelling to Spain or by being descendants of Europeans, are nostalgic for a different time in history, when obesity was rare.

Those pleasant sensory experiences were the precursors of the strategies used by food industry laboratories to stimulate appetite and the biological mechanisms that make us feel good – for a while. In search of well-being, people consume industrial foods, eat, and over-eat!

Physically active populations need relatively high amounts of dietary energy. For them bread, the first commonly consumed ultra-processed product, had benefits. It also became convenient. If, as Lluís Serra-Majem says, the Spanish people did not suffer epidemic obesity over half a century ago, this certainly was not because they were protected by the consumption of 300 grams a day of bread. Simply, this amount provided around 800 kilocalories, helping to supply their energy needs, and it probably made them a bit heavier than if they had not consumed it.

Lluís Serra-Majem says that bread consumption in Spain has now dropped to an average 80 grams a day, while overweight and obesity has increased. One reason for this is that the industrialisation of the Spanish food supply has displaced bread with even more energy-dense ultra-processed products. If the now-sedentary Spanish people increased their bread consumption to 300 grams a day they would become fatter, unless they cut out much of the rest of the food they now consume.

The benefits that Lluís Serra-Majem attributes to bread had validity in the world of his grandparents, and for their way of life and culture, which were about much more than bread. For almost all the people in the Mediterranean region, those times have passed.

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