



Food Rules

My son's love affair with the junk food aisle

BY ELISSA CATERFINO MANDEL

The argument begins over Oodles of Noodles. My son loves it. He wants to consume it – every day if I let him. I counter that anything with “oodles” in its name that comes in such a miniscule box is by nature misleading.

Maybe because the box is so small and nondescript, or maybe because I'm opposed to serving something that in theory could be created at home with chicken broth and egg noodles, it takes me about three weeks to find Oodles of Noodles in the grocery store. And then unfortunately, I uncover it nestled insidiously between the cubes of chicken broth and the packages of onion soup mix. It might as well announce itself: “Here I am, a product with ingredients so chemically laden no one can pronounce them, designed expressly for parents too lazy to make homemade soup.” The thing is, my son doesn't much like homemade soup – I've tried – or homemade macaroni and cheese or white bread that advertises itself as being whole grain or cereal and crackers that claim to be organic. Even when he doesn't see the packaging, he can sniff out healthful food like some misguided drug dog. And in spite of my efforts, he refuses to eat it.

I'm embarrassed by my grocery cart filled with names like Hostess, Entenmann and Nabisco. And then there's my personal favorite: Polly-O string cheese. Why does cheese have to come as a string? I don't drink rope milk or eat cord yogurt. And yet my son is unaccountably fixed on a dairy product with the consistency of something that could just as easily be sold in a hardware store.

Now there arises the obvious question: Why do I buy Brian this storehouse of junk? As a young child, my son never was exposed to products like this – I don't think I even had a Frito in the house until he was nine. But about that time, I remarried, inheriting two stepsons who had a drawer in their house devoted to candy. When Brian was younger, I was able to guide his food choices a little more assiduously even with inveterate junk food consumers in the house. Then he hit about 14 and it suddenly occurred to him that the world, or at least the junk food aisle in the supermarket, could be his.

Because of my son, I'm now familiar with sections of the grocery store heretofore unexplored by me. Even my stepsons haven't stooped to the low of Oodles of Noodles. Every week Brian puts things on his list that I'd never in my life dreamed of buying. Sometimes I wonder when I hit the checkout line whether the clerk is calculating, based on my stash, what the various members of my family must weigh. Little does he know that the individual who consumes this non-nutritive nonsense is nearly six feet tall and has a hard time breaking 145 on the scale.

I know, I know. It will catch up with him. One day he won't be able to eat like an incinerator for every highly sweetened processed food product on the market. By buying for him, I'm not only feeding his junk food habit, but I'm also (quite possibly) endangering his health. His future wife will undoubtedly think he was raised by some strange Willy Wonka offshoot. But on some level, I keep thinking if I make this non-food readily available, one day he'll beg for its antithesis. “Another Twinkie? Yuk; won't you please steam me some fresh broccoli rabe, mother?” Isn't familiarity supposed to breed contempt?

My son claims when he doesn't have his daily dose of junk, he loses weight. The implication is that in order to keep him resembling something other than a figure out of the Gumby cartoons, I have to ply him with junk. So I lecture him about good eating habits. I make sure to cut carrots and fresh fruit and lay them next to his plate in the event that he decides to choose wisely. I pray that I won't be cited by the nutrition police – or at the very least, my mother.

Often Brian humors me and eats well in addition to eating badly. And while I don't love math, I pray for a mathematical miracle, that somehow, some way, the eight big grapes and blueberries I sneak onto his after-dinner snack plate will cancel out the Little Debbie. 

Elissa Caterfino Mandel is a South Orange mother, a college counselor and college essay advisor.