

Butter Tales and Saturated-Fat Stories

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Lynn Henschen, center front, has been proudly eating butter for 56 years. He's pictured here on his family farm in Central Illinois circa 1960 with his father Laverne, left, brother Terry, right, and grandfather Albert, center back.

I never thought I'd say this, but my dad was right all along.

For the last 15 years or so, my brothers, sister and I (and probably my mom) have been somewhat cruelly teasing my father about his love for dairy, particularly butter. There *must* be butter in the house at all times. Sour cream and milk are similar staples. A temporary dairy shortage in the kitchen is a veritable natural disaster. Of course, those foods are a way of life for a man who grew up on a second-generation dairy farm. In my youth, each trip to a restaurant (likely a steakhouse) meant Dad was ordering a T-bone and baked potato with extra sour cream and butter.

Delicious? Of course. Healthy? Hardly. Or so we thought. A recently published [meta-analysis of health studies](#) [1] shows that saturated fats don't have the deleterious effects on heart health that were preached for decades. While more research into the matter is necessary, these findings shut the refrigerator door on a dry slice of food history.

At the same time, recent data shows a [25 percent jump consumption of butter](#) [2] in the last decade, bringing it to a 40-year high. Part of that equation is a shift away from trans fats. The consumer trend of preferring less-processed counterparts is undeniable. If there's one thing Americans do well, it's get on a [dietary bandwagon](#) [3] whole hog.

As far back as I can recall, the nutritional intelligentsia has cycled through crazes that demonize a single food or macronutrient: fat, calories, carbohydrates. But my father, the cattle farmer, Mr. Meat, Milk and Potatoes, stood firm.

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According to *New York Time* food writer Mark Bittman, [data](#) [4] show that sugar and ultra-processed foods are the “[real villains in our diet](#) [5].” Given the knee-jerk reversal of opinion on saturated fat, one could choose to take that information with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, ‘less processed=better for you’ is a growing consumer perception. This brings food manufacturers to a fork in the road. One path is to find ways to reduce the processing their wares undergo. The other is to continue in the same direction and see where they end up.

A move toward less-processed food puts many manufacturers in a pickle. But solutions may be simpler than they appear from the outset. There’s a burgeoning science in reformulating foods for shorter shelf-lives and using alternative sweeteners and [additives](#) [6]. The move toward less-processed foods isn’t upsetting the applecart; it’s an evolution. One that a growing number of consumers are willing to pay for at the checkout.

When I was a teenager following ‘90s food trends (Surge and Lunchables, anyone?), my father harped on me for refusing to consume any sliver of fat I found in the steaks and roasts abundant in the family’s meal rotation. “That’s the best part,” he’d say. “Your body needs fat to live.” It was true, but teenage-me didn’t want to hear it. I ate as little fat as possible, as did most health-minded folks at the time.

This week, for the first time in years, I brought butter home from the grocery store. Three pounds of it. Now, note that two of those were unsalted and ended up in a cake and icing. The other pound was for personal consumption — over an extended period of time, mind you. I’m not even a quarter of the way through the first stick. But butter is back in my life.

So, along with butter, I’m eating crow. To my dad, the dairy freedom fighter: You were right. The science is in. You can have your cake and eat it too!

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Links:

- [1] <http://annals.org/article.aspx?articleid=1846638>
- [2] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/videos/2014/02/butter-makes-comeback>
- [3] http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/03/28/295332576/why-we-got-fatter-during-the-fat-free-food-boom?ft=1&f=1053&utm_source=food&utm_campaign=artsculture&utm_medium=twitter
- [4] <http://authoritynutrition.com/6-graphs-the-war-on-fat-was-a-mistake/>
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/opinion/bittman-butter-is-back.html>
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