

*Hiding vegetables from kids is in—(and mystery meat explained)*

IN 1981 THE USDA held serious conversations over whether to reclassify ketchup as a vegetable. This piece of bureaucratic flim-falmmery was immediately pilloried in the press, rejected by an appalled public, and consequently dropped by the Reagan administration.

The concept is back, but this time it's the major processed food-product companies who are busy doing the convincing, and they seem to be succeeding where the USDA failed. Americans are eagerly embracing Sloppy Joes, jarred sauces, and cans of spaghetti that allegedly hide a full serving of veggies as long as they guarantee a hassle-free meal with their children. But whether these products really provide a balanced, healthy meal and a *real* serving of vegetables, how such conclusions are reached, and what criteria they are based on, is not fully explained in the ads. We are only told that kids will eat it, if you don't tell them what's actually in it.

Right... kids eat worms, mud pies, and Play-Doh, as well as unlocked poisons, cleaning solvents, and pretty colored pills if they can get their hands on them, so pardon me if I remain unimpressed by this touted achievement. I'm more interested in how these manufacturers can conclude that some highly processed puree is the same thing as a fresh vegetable.

Even if most of the puree, or all of it for that matter, is synthesized from actual vegetables, is that really enough to claim it's the same thing? It could be a 100% vegetable-based product and still not equal a vegetable nutritionally or otherwise—hear me out:

The human body, we are told, is 77-98% water (there is a bit of a scientific debate over the exact amount, so let's just say it's mostly water.) This means, by ad-speak logic, a glass of water contains at least 77% human heart.

Is corn sweetener considered a vegetable? How about gluten? The food thickeners derived from kelp? Where exactly is the line drawn? At what point in its processing does a vegetable cease to be considered a vegetable? And is a vegetable something that can be tested for and quantified? Let's not forget, melamine appeared to be protein in standard food tests.

But, let's set my skepticism of these vegetable equivalency claims aside: what is the societal goal here? Or is there only a capitalistic one? And what does this desire to hide-the-vegetables-in-the-goop as a marketing strategy say about our current culture, our relationship with the natural world, and especially, our willingness to create a generation who has to be tricked into eating their greens?

Up until now these processed food substances were generally used as a last nutritional resort for those unable to chew and swallow on their own and were pumped through a tube, in a process known as gavage. Now they are appearing in snack foods, candy bars, and energy drinks. They are sold as the healthier alternative to real food. More nutritional than real food. And kid-friendly.

*Food Putty: it's not just for your comatose grandma*

*anymore!*

But it gets weirder. The class-action federal lawsuit against Taco Bell flips this debate on its head: Taco Bell is accused of serving taco meat that is more filler than meat. The amount of meat to filler is the point of contention. But had Taco Bell merely claimed the fillers were hidden vegetables, they'd have been lauded as helping us raise healthier children—lawsuit solved. (An interesting side note: the USDA only requires that these types of processed meat products be 40% meat.)

Whether Popeye should trade in his spinach can for Spaghetti-O's or Charlton Heston should have looked into what percentage of human being was actually in those crackers, I leave to you. As for me, I'll keep my veggies intact and recognizable, thank you very much.



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