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MELINDA HEMMELGARN Thinking Critically About the Bigger Picture of Food Safety

By Juliann Schaeffer

Best known as the award-winning Food Sleuth columnist and radio show host, Melinda Hemmelgarn, MS, RD, LD, is an investigative nutritionist on a perpetual pursuit to uncover the real story behind food's foremost headlines—and bring that message to the masses.

A passionate advocate for growing and eating organic and locally produced food and living sustainably, she's broached topics from antibiotic resistance and pesticide use to food allergies and GMOs through Food Sleuth. She pays special attention to how what we eat affects the environment (and vice versa) and puts special emphasis on what dietitians and consumers can do to create and support a more nutritious food supply, more responsible food system, and more sustainable planet.

As the founder and former director of the University of Missouri's Nutrition Communications Center, Hemmelgarn led the movement for integrating media literacy into nutrition education, where she helped the next generation of educators and journalists "think beyond their plates" and deconstruct mass media messages about food and nutrition. A member of two national organic farming boards, the Association of Health Care Journalists and the National Association for Media Literacy Education, Hemmelgarn has spent more than two decades speaking, writing, and thereby inspiring innumerable nutrition professionals and others on the most imperative issues surrounding food safety today.

An RD with 30-plus years of nutrition experience in clinical, academic, and public health nutrition, you'd never guess that Hemmelgarn didn't intend to become a dietitian. In college, she majored in the arts until one fateful semester when she took a nutrition class and became passionate about the connection between food and health. The rest is history.

Hemmelgarn still dabbles in the arts, though. "I travel and work creatively with my husband on a project called 'FARM: Food, Art, Revolution, Media,' which blends compelling photography with stories about our food system," she says. "We also developed a set of note cards to help celebrate farmers who feed us well."

A true artist finds inspiration everywhere, and the nutrition field may have just lucked out to find itself as Hemmelgarn's greatest muse.

Today's Dietitian (TD): Who inspired your career path?

Hemmelgarn: My career path continues to be inspired every day, but certainly by my parents and grandparents, who taught me compassion, respect for nature, and the pleasure of good food.

Also, my patients at the Veterans Hospital in Columbia, Missouri, who struggled with the ravages of war, poverty, and related illness, inspired me. Plus heroes in the consumer, food, environmental, and social justice movements, including Joan Gussow, Theo Colborne, Sandra Steingraber, Rachel Carson, Esther Peterson, and Kathleen Dean Moore, as well as anyone featured on the Americans Who Tell the Truth website.

TD: Do you have an organics mentor or are you more self-taught on the subject?

Hemmelgarn: Organic, agro-ecological farmers as well as the soil, plant, and environmental scientists who attempt to understand the science behind how all things are connected have been my greatest teachers.

TD: Favorite professional "mistake"?

Hemmelgarn: It's not my favorite, but it's one of the biggest professional and personal mistakes I've made: feeding my children industrial food—before I knew better.

TD: What is your proudest career accomplishment?

Hemmelgarn: Being selected for a Food and Society Policy Fellowship. It helped me connect my clinical understanding of food and health with agriculture. And it gave me opportunities to be creative, and meet and learn from national movers and shakers in our food system, compassionate food activists, and farmers who have tremendous ecological insights.

TD: You've said, "I've learned that food uniquely defines our home, describes our heritage, and predicts our future." Can you explain what you mean by this?

Hemmelgarn: Our ethnicity, history, culture, and demographics influence what we eat, which thereby affects our personal health and that of our environment today and in the future.

TD: In your opinion, what's the biggest food safety issue facing the public today?

Hemmelgarn: There are three big ones:

1. antibiotic resistance due to abuses in industrial livestock management;
2. environmental contamination with the increasing use of pesticides and herbicides related to genetically engineered crops; and
3. the loss of biodiversity, which weakens our resilience, also a by-product of industrial farming methods.

TD: You've written a great deal about media literacy. Can you explain what it means to be "media literate," and why it's so important, especially for RDs, to "think beyond the headlines"?

Hemmelgarn: Media literacy describes our ability to deconstruct, analyze, and create media messages. RDs have a unique role in interpreting food and nutrition media messages for consumers. We can help our clients understand the importance of knowing who owns, profits, or benefits from those messages.

TD: If you could offer clients only one piece of advice, what would it be?

Hemmelgarn: Choose local, regional, whole organic food whenever you can and be an advocate for it.

TD: Give us a peek inside your refrigerator/cupboard. What are the mainstays of your kitchen?

Hemmelgarn: Homegrown garlic; fairly traded, organic chocolate and coffee; organic virgin olive oil; organic dairy products; organic eggs; and lots of seasonal organic produce from my farmers' market and backyard garden.

TD: What does your organic garden grow?

Hemmelgarn: I have largely replaced my lawn with Missouri native flowers, plus herbs, vegetables, and fruit, including tomatoes, black raspberries, blackberries, basil, mint, thyme, sage, nasturtiums, peppers, peas, kale, garlic, and chard. Gardening is another artistic expression—with tasty benefits.

TD: Favorite winter holiday dish to serve?

Hemmelgarn: Roasted organic root vegetables with garlic cloves and fresh rosemary sprigs tossed with organic extra-virgin olive oil, a drizzle of maple syrup, and a sprinkling of coarse salt.

TD: How can RDs best help clients "think beyond their plate"?

Hemmelgarn: Ask where your food comes from, who produced it, and under what conditions.

TD: What are your best budget-friendly tips for shopping organic?

Hemmelgarn: 1. Think differently about the price of food. Organic is a bargain if you do some full-cost accounting. Cheap food really isn't; we pay in the long run with our tax dollars for agricultural

subsidies, environmental clean-up, and health care costs, not to mention quality of life. Look at the value in choosing clean food.

2. Grow some of your own food, purchase directly from farmers, and participate in community-supported agriculture.
3. Offset food costs by cooking and eating at home.

TD: Can you explain why choosing organic is the smart choice, even though the jury's still out on exactly how and which pesticides, GMOs, and food additives may be harming our bodies?

Hemmelgarn: Actually, if you follow the science, many of the verdicts are in. For example, we know many pesticides and herbicides used with GMO crops and industrial farming are endocrine disruptors. And we know (from USDA data) that farmers are applying even more herbicides today due to herbicide-resistant weeds associated with GMO cropping systems. Keep in mind, too, that we lack long-term independent studies on GMO safety with regard to public health and the environment. When it comes to protecting our health, farm worker health, our children's health, and our environment, it's always better to err on the side of precaution. Organic certification is the consumer's best assurance that their food is "clean."

TD: In your view, which is the bigger threat facing children today: obesity or pesticides?

Hemmelgarn: They're both dangerous and may actually be related in some cases, depending on the dosing and timing of pesticide exposure.

TD: What foods do you crave?

Hemmelgarn: Whatever is newly in season: strawberries and rhubarb in spring, peaches in summer, butternut squash in fall, etc. I'm also addicted to really good coffee.

TD: What's one question you've never been asked but would love to answer?

Hemmelgarn: "If you could have dinner with anyone who would it be?" My paternal grandparents, whom I never knew. My grandfather was a Works Progress Administration artist, and my grandmother was his model. He painted a mural in the Harlem Courthouse (in New York) titled "Exploitation of Labor and Hoarding of Wealth." Clearly, he inspires my work.

TD: Favorite place or way to relax and unwind?

Hemmelgarn: Being physically active anywhere in the peace and beauty of nature.

— Juliann Schaeffer is a freelance writer and editor based in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and a frequent contributor to *Today's Dietitian*.