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The Mac Weekly – Debate Rages as Café Mac Examines Low Carbon Diet

As America proceeds into the 21st century, being environmentally conscious has become more of a common practice. The use of solar panels increased over the last year as well as and the number of wind turbines. It's common practice to recycle, and the "Three Rs" are taught in the majority of schools and homes across America. But there is one area that is often forgotten under the scrutiny of environmental consciousness: the food industry.

"People don't realize how much their diet affects the wider environment," Justin Lee '08, the Environmental Liaison for Facilities and Management said. "Going from the typical American meat eating diet to a vegetarian is like trading in your Hummer for a Prius."

Scientists believe that food consumption contributes to roughly one third of global warming each year. According to Bon Appetit, this is because "Agriculture in the U.S. food system relies heavily on fossil fuel; burning fossil fuels in the transportation and processing of food products cause carbon dioxide emissions." These emissions, along with the methane gas released by livestock, and the nitrous oxide that is a side product of contemporary fertilization, combine to make the three most common greenhouse gasses. That much is known; the question now is what can be done about it. "There is no one study that pulls it altogether," Bon Appetit said. "So we have been piecing together the puzzle ourselves."

Students at Mac have also taken up the initiative.

“I think it should be important to everyone,” Terence Steinberg ’11 said. “Food is extremely valuable. I’ve traveled to a lot of places where people don’t have any food... we waste food and act like it doesn’t impact food production. To waste any of the output is extremely irresponsible.”

Since President Brian Rosenberg signed the President’s Climate Commitment last year, Mac has undergone several changes around campus, in an effort to reduce the college’s contribution to Global Warming. Subsidized bus passes have gone on sale to encourage students to choose alternative methods of transportation to their cars. Events like “Campus Wars” and the “Great Light Bulb Switch Out” have also been implemented. Now these efforts are focusing on ways to reduce energy in food production and consumption.

Steinberg was one of the coordinators of Mac’s Waste Awareness Campaign, a project created by the Conservation Psychology class in collaboration with the MCSG governing board. The project was an effort to make Mac students more aware of how individual meal choices can have an impact on the environment. Steinberg said the primary reason he got involved was because he saw food waste at Mac as a problem not being addressed. “I wanted to do it because no one else was taking a step forward,” he said. “At least it keeps [students] from wasting food for a day, I think it’s a good thing.”

Lori Hartzell, General Manager of Bon Appetit at Macalester, agrees with Steinberg about the amount of food waste students create.

“[Recently], I watched a guy pile two hamburgers and five pieces of pizza on his plate,” Hartzell said. “He actually threw away a hamburger and two pieces of pizza. That’s the kind of thing we’re trying to pay attention to.”

“People scrape [the waste off their plates] away like it’s toxic,” Steinberg said. “They just ate it, but once it had the connotation of waste, they wouldn’t touch it.”

The project spanned over two days. On March 16, students eating at Café Mac were instructed to scrape all uneaten food into containers, which were weighed and recorded after every meal. The next day, the same thing happened, only this time students were not allowed to use trays while selecting their foods. The results were telling: on Tuesday, students wasted 170 pounds of food waste. On Wednesday with the loss of trays, the amount of waste dropped to 68 pounds.

“For a first try, I thought it went really well” Steinberg said of the project. “Lots of room for improvement, but also for a first show, it went well.” Looking back, Steinberg said he wishes there was a way to do a secret control test, as a way to compare against the results. “If we could tell people ‘we measured last week and it was 600 pounds,’ I think we could increase awareness.”

Steinberg said those involved hope to make the Waste Awareness Campaign a semi-annual event. The campaign hopes that by making it a fun event, they will be able to increase environmental consciousness on campus.

But, Steinberg said, there are ways that individuals can make an impact on a daily basis. “Take less than you think you want,” he suggested. “People take more than they need. If you have too much, then maybe save it for later. These are really minor inconveniences. There are plenty of people who come here everyday and don’t waste food, and it’s not like they’re sadder or more stressed, they just aren’t wasting as much food.”

Although the Waste Awareness Campaign was only a two-day event, as a result of its success, Café Mac has created “Trayless Tuesdays”, in an effort to reduce food waste on a more frequent basis.

“Not having to wash roughly 3,000 trays is a good thing,” Lee said. “It saves an enormous amount of water and energy that it would take to heat the water, and I don’t think anyone’s calculated that yet, but I’m willing to bet it saves an enormous amount of water and energy.”

Not everyone is happy about the change, however. “It’s a matter of education versus regulation,” Andrew Johnson, 09 said. “Café Mac is saying you can’t use the trays, that’s heavy regulation. I’d like to see more education. Why not make me run a gauntlet to make me eat. Put in booby traps and... poison every third plate- I’d eat a lot less.” Johnson laughed, “Education should be a long term goal. When I leave Café Mac, do you think I’ll have a tray on Tuesdays? It’s a symbolic gesture. I don’t really care about symbolism, I care about results.”

But Trayless Tuesdays are apparently becoming a trend in American colleges. “Colleges all over have already implemented this,” Hartzell said. “Harvard, Colorado, Santa Clara. It’s not just here, it’s not just Bon Appetit.”

Along with Trayless Tuesdays, Café Mac’s has recently implemented the new Low Carbon diet program. The program kicked off with Low Carbon Diet Day. Taking place on Earth day, the event was designed to show students how to be carbon conscious when making their food selections. “What we’re trying to do is show how food has an impact on the environment,” Hartzell explained. Carbon-heavy foods like beef and cheese were temporarily removed from the menu; items like locally grown fruits and vegetables, and turkey (a lower carbon-emitting option) were highlighted.

But Johnson doesn’t approve of the program. “I’m bitter about the faulty assumptions they’re making,” Johnson said. “There’s certainly some validity in the argument, but [there’s more to it].”

“The primary problem is purely they’re not taking into account the full carbon count,” he said. “Transportation is one part of the calculation. I don’t see why any environmentalist is thinking they’re helping the environment by taking a magnifying glass to a boat traveling across the ocean.”

Johnson is not alone in his skepticism. “A lot of people saw Low Carbon Day as an inconvenience.” Steinberg said. “[They’d say] ‘Oh, there’s no cheese today,’ but they didn’t think about why.”

Hartzell says she doesn’t understand why students might be feeling kept in the dark. “We’ve posted stuff up all over,” she said. “I don’t know what else we could do. There were signs up, marketing, I put two ads in the Mac Weekly... if they’re not reading it, then I’m not sure what the issue is. It’s not our job to educate in the scientific stuff, I guess I feel we’ve done our job... short of running my own classroom I don’t know what else to do.”

Although Lee wholly approves of the program, he says he finds the advertising “clunky” and problematic. “The whole ‘Is my burger causing global warming’ is guilt based,” Lee said. “Which I am generally not a fan of.” Lee went on to explain that Bon Appetit and Café Mac have more constructive arguments they could be making. “I’d prefer Bon Appetit talking up that, how they’re improving the economy in south west Minnesota [by] helping eat local, so then they’re playing up the positive rather than guilt tripping.”

The most prominent evidence of the Low Carbon program is a recent change in fruit selections. Currently, Café Mac offers bananas only during breakfast and lunch, and pineapple only on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

“Stuff gets flown in by plane, the most inefficient way to move something,” Lee said. “Just think, how many times do you fly to Hawaii a year? Your [pineapple] flies 7,000 miles everyday.” Lee said that choices like reducing the number of imported fruits can have a significant impact on the environment. “Part of it is students need to think, are fruits like that something you have to eat everyday? ...Or should fruits like that be more of a treat?”

But it seems that some students are having trouble adjusting to the new changes.

“I don’t understand why they don’t take away the strawberries, too, then,” Matt Day ’10 said.

“It’s just a small thing,” Johnson said. “But it’s someone telling me I can’t have a banana because it’s bad for the environment. Café Mac shouldn’t decide that for me, I should.”

A group has been formed on Facebook in support of the bananas, and Café Mac has been bombarded with requests to bring the fruits back. “I think it’s interesting, Café Mac gets to kick out bananas but cost has stayed the same,” Johnson said.

Hartzell was quick to clarify. “If we buy less bananas, we’ll order more apples. Buying local food costs more, it’s pretty much a wash in saving.”

Like Lee, Hartzell believes that the changes ultimately make students take a look at what impact they as individuals have on the environment when they eat at Café Mac. “I think what needs to happen is people need to look at what the choices they make impact,” she said. “By us giving vegetarian and vegan option, you have more choices. For all people to put this awareness into their own lives would be great. I don’t think it’s up to me, it’s not my choice.”

But Lee can also see where students like Johnson, who raise concerns about having their food “regulated. And coming from. “I would agree,” Lee said. “Café Mac is an independent contractor, the Café Mac we see is only a very small part of Bon Appetit. Students are working with people who are honestly at the tail end of the process, and students need to remember that.”

So what next for Café Mac? “My dream world is a world where you purchase your own food, and face the real world costs.” Johnson said. The more realistic dream is that we get rid of buffet style eating.” Buffet eating leads to students feeling pressured to make their eight dollars count, and getting the most bang for their buck, Johnson said.

Steinberg has a different vision. “I’ve heard rumors of a compost,” Steinberg said. “That might just be a fairy tale, but that’d be great. That’d be optimal.”

“People have given Café Mac a hard time because they don’t compost,” Lee said in response. “But the loading dock is too small, and there’s nowhere to put the waste. You just have to wait a little longer; the infrastructure isn’t set up yet. Bon Appetit wants to do it, there’s just no staff person to move it.”

Hartzell wants Bon Appetit to continue to uphold their commitment to being eco-friendly and environmentally conscious. “This is the future,” Hartzell said. “We have to start thinking about it. I think Bon Appetit is doing the right thing, and I’m proud to be apart of that.”

Lee offers his own advice. “I would challenge students to really question Bon Appetit and Café Mac,” Lee said. “Make sure they understand why changes are happening. Get involved. Actually learn. To not just be critical, but get involved and lean why what’s going on is going on. ...Education first, before you start knocking down doors.”

For More Information, Please visit these websites:

- The Bon Appetit's "Circle of Responsibility" commitment to being environmentally conscious - <http://www.circleofresponsibility.com/>
- To read about other colleges opting to go "trayless" visit:
<http://www.journalpioneer.com/index.cfm?pid=1632&cpcat=world&stry=65469029>
- Find out how certain foods can contribute to global warming:
<http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/3956>
- Look at what else Macalester students have to say about food and sustainability:
<http://www.macalester.edu/environmentalstudies/audits/audit2002food.htm>
- Read more about Andrew Johnson's views of eating globally:
<http://media.www.themacweekly.com/media/storage/paper1230/news/2008/04/25/Opinion/Eat-Local.No.Eat.Global-3345512.shtml?reffeature=recentlycommentedstoriestab>