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What is Healthy Food?

Five MU experts tackle a simple, yet surprisingly nettlesome question.

Story by Erik Potter

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Everyone knows some foods are healthy for you and some are not. But ask five experts to define “healthy foods,” and you’ll get five different answers — and likely a few exasperated expressions.

“I found the assignment ... to try to define healthy food to be the most annoying and difficult part of accepting this offer to speak on this panel,” said Kevin Fritsche, a professor in the animal sciences and nutrition and exercise physiology departments, at a Healthy Food panel discussion Sept. 24 in Memorial Union.

The event was the first of five weekly panels put together by Mizzou Advantage’s Food System Network and supported by Mizzou Advantage and MU Extension. The next session will focus on

affordable food and is from 3:30–5 p.m., Oct. 1 in the Strickland Room of Memorial Union.

The discussions are designed to spark dialogue and collaboration between Mizzou researchers studying various aspects of the food system. The Food Systems Network, led by Donna Mehrle, BS HES '76, extension associate for nutrition and physiology in the College of Human Environmental



Photo by Rob Hill.

Sciences, and Mary Hendrickson, MS '94, PhD '97, assistant professor of rural sociology, hopes to promote a coordinated, comprehensive study of food, from how we grow it to how we transport it, from why we eat the foods we do to what they do inside our bodies.

But the first step in building a network is to bring everyone together and find out how they approach the topic.

So over plates of red pepper hummus and a vegetable medley of cauliflower, red pepper and celery, a group of several dozen faculty, staff and students listened to a lively — and often humorous — discussion about healthful food:

- Deborah Pearsall, professor emeritus of anthropology, took a broad view, contending

that healthy food is any that promotes physical, mental and emotional health and the functioning of a society's social and food/nutrition system.

- Carol Lorenzen, professor of animal sciences, said healthy food is a complete protein that is presented in a tasty, appealing and safe manner — with beef being a prime example.
- Dr. David Goldstein, a pediatric endocrinologist and professor emeritus of clinical child health, offered up “food that does not contain ingredients or contaminants known to contribute to adverse health outcomes.”
- Laina Fullum, BS HES '98, food service director for Columbia Public Schools, said it is “foods that provide essential nutrients, energy, building blocks to support the human at an optimal level for disease prevention.”
- Fritsche said, “Those foods that contribute to meeting our overall nutrient requirement and promote health,” highlighting “nutrient profiling” — systems that rank foods by their nutrient composition — as a way to measure how healthful a food is.

The panelists covered a range of issues during audience questions, hitting on how grass-fed beef is not better nutritionally than conventional beef, how food allergies in children might be rising a little but not as much as they are reported by parents, and how food is foremost a social experience — evidenced by how no one would eat “Purina Human Chow” even if

it met our overall nutrient requirements.

A highlight of the event was when Lorenzen, in response to an audience question, was defending the use of antibiotics in cattle. She explained that ranchers who sell organic beef can't even inoculate or de-worm their calves. Lorenzen is the proud owner of a 4-month-old puppy who has already had six sets of shots and been de-wormed more than once. "That's how you take care of a puppy," she said. "A kid you do probably even more than that, right?"

"Even the de-worming?" asked Fritsche amid audience laughter.

"Maybe!" she replied.

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