

## Alumna Spotlight

## Marion Nestle, Ph.D., M.P.H. '86

*Every day, Marion Nestle speaks to reporters, business people, or government officials, doing her best to make the public aware of the ways in which the food industry's advertising machine and political lobby create national nutritional trends, and, in some cases, affect national policy. A professor and director of public health initiatives in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, Nestle draws on her own research and analysis of scientific, social, cultural, and economic factors that influence dietary recommendations and practices.*

Her two recent books established her as an advocate for public health nutrition and a food industry gadfly, alerting people to the unethical practices of this enormously powerful lobby. Engagingly written with the lay reader in mind, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* describes how, much as Big Tobacco perpetuated the myth that smoking wasn't harmful or addictive, the food industry contributes to the nation's struggle with overweight and obesity. The industry's marketing practices undermine dietary advice (including the structure of the USDA's famous food pyramid) and exploit consumers'—especially children's—vulnerability to misleading messages about our changing food predilections and eating practices. *Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism*, continues the debate by exposing how economics and government figure into issues such as food-related bioterrorism, genetically modified foods, and food irradiation.

How did this UC Berkeley-educated Ph.D. in molecular biology develop her expertise in nutrition? Serendipity played a major role. As part of her first teaching job at Brandeis University, Nestle was charged with teaching botany, zoology, and nutrition to pre-med students. While the concepts and jargon of cellular and molecular biology were abstract and off-putting for the students, the nutrition class was a hit. "Everybody eats; everybody is interested in nutrition; everybody relates it to his or her own personal life immediately," Nestle remembers. "It was the most exciting teaching experience I'd ever had."

When the opportunity arose at UCSF's School of Medicine to teach nutrition to medical students, residents, and practicing physicians, Nestle eagerly accepted. She was able to build a comprehensive and successful program, which hosted a popular lecture series and inspired the insertion of nutrition sections into several clinical specialty rotations.

After a decade of working in the medical community, she learned much about clinical nutrition. She also realized, however, that she was in a very difficult position. "I was at a medical school without an M.D. And I wasn't doing basic biomedical research. I didn't quite fit," she explains. Various people suggested that, with public health degree credentials, she would be in a much better position to teach nutrition.

Once she started work on her M.P.H., many opportunities opened up for her. She ultimately joined the Department of Health and Human Services as senior policy advisor and managing editor of the 1988 *Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health*. The experience offered a prime view of the political aspects of national policymaking. It is this understanding that provides authenticity to her writing and practical knowledge to her participation in many governmental and private sector advisory committees.



Marion Nestle and Dean Shortell at the School's 2004 commencement, where Nestle, as Public Health Alumna of the Year, delivered the keynote address.

But Nestle's expertise truly gelled when she came to NYU as a professor and chair of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health. "I'd done clinical nutrition while at UCSF. I did public health while I was at Berkeley. I did top public policy in Washington. Then I came to NYU, where I was able to put it all together," she says. Nestle became an educator of not just future public health professionals, but also policy makers, the media, food industry decision makers, and ultimately the public.

Noting the parallels between the food and tobacco industries, she says, "Tobacco's simpler, in a way. The relationship of one product to disease is much better defined. And the message about tobacco is much simpler: 'Don't smoke!'"

Battling the food industry will be much more complicated, she anticipates. "There are more than 300,000 food products in the American marketplace. And the message has to be, 'Eat this instead of that,' or 'Eat less in general.' These are much more complicated messages...and not messages that have ever been advertised or promoted in any way with money behind them. We've never had a nutrition education campaign in this country that focused on real messages."

In recognition of her accomplishments as an academic, an author, and an authority on food, Nestle has been named UC Berkeley School of Public Health's 2004 Alumna of the Year. 🍷

— Johanna Van Hise Heart