# What's for Dinner in the USA – 2025 AD?

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Over the past thirty years or so, we have been involved in studying, writing and speaking about various parts of the United States Food Industry System—its growth and development, its efficiency and productivity, its structure, its management, and most of all its future. This paper will focus upon what goes through this system. We will be talking mainly about the food products, services and perceptions that might be, would be, should be moving through the system to meet the changing nutritional needs of our citizens in 2025 AD.

### Nutrient Delivery System – 1997

Back in the early 1970s, we developed a concept, "Nutrient Delivery System,"[1] to help us study food distribution systems and their development over time. Our current "NDS" is well documented statistically by the USDA's Tony Gallo[2], The Food Institute[3], and others.

We would characterize this system as part of a worldwide network; complex; multilevel; high-tech (production, processing, distribution and information systems); concentrated, with increasing market power; relatively profitable; constantly changing internally to increase efficiency and productivity and externally to increase the availability of meals, any time and any place. Industry initiatives such as "ECR" and "EFR" and those that follow will proceed to fine-tune the system efficiency-wise.

We have a good system that works pretty well. That will continue to get better, at the margin, doing its job of delivering food and food products to our citizens. This is not the issue of this particular paper.

### Life-Style — USA

As a society, our lives are filled with high stress. We are basically sedentary, with low or improper levels of exercise. We smoke, drink alcohol, and take drugs — legal and illegal. We have high levels of heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and many assorted life-style and diet-related problems.

We are a nation of "snackers," whose diet contains too much fat, salt, cholesterol and sweeteners; but it's "okay" if it tastes good. We bolt our food and wonder why we have digestive problems.

With a few exceptions, we have a low level of knowledge of nutrition and have essentially lost our ability to prepare meals from scratch. For better or worse, we find ourselves in a situation where we cannot or will not take more than a passive role in preparing our own meals.

In addition to the current generation, we seem to have passed a predisposition to many of our diet and exercise problems to our children. None of this should come as a surprise.

The pertinent question for our society is: What is the likelihood of significant positive changes in our basic life-style by 2025 AD? Short of monumental disaster, the odds are slim to none. So, without change, our future nutrient delivery system will be delivering food and food products into a similar basic life-style as today's.

We must realize that life-style has a big impact on diet, and it is impossible to separate the two, even in this paper. In order to change diet, life-style must be changed as well.

### Food, Food Products, Services and Perceptions

In terms of the ingredients and technologies available to the food industry system from which to deliver the food and food products to our citizens in 2025 AD, one sees little in terms of monumental change. While there is always the possibility of breakthroughs anywhere along the system, we will be essentially dealing with what we already have, some twenty-eight years hence.

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[1] "Nutrient Delivery System — A Human Feeding Concept for 2000 AD and Beyond," J.L. Cain, *Journal of Food Distribution Research*, Vol. IV, No. 3, September, 1973.

[2] "The Food Marketing System in 1995," Anthony E. Gallo, AIB No. 731 USDA, December 1996.

[3] Food Retailing Review – 1996, The Food Institute, 1996.

What can change rapidly is the amount and kind of services added to the basic food ingredients somewhere within the system. This is how and to what degree we prepare and process our future food products. Perceptions of food and food products can be changed dramatically over time.

**Challenge**

The challenges here are two fold:

First, is to change the consumption patterns of 300 million Americans from the current less healthy to a more healthy diet. This indeed could be monumental. One generation will probably not be enough time to accomplish all that must be done. As we should have learned by now, attitudes change far more slowly than technologies.

Second, given the changes in consumption patterns (however long they take), the food industry system will have to change its mix of products, services and perceptions to meet and anticipate their consumer needs.

This is sort of a "chicken and egg" proposition. Given the high degree of dependency of today's consumers upon the food industry to provide an array of choices, it is not just a simple proposition of consumers saying (en mass) we want xyz and the food industry responds. The real situation is much more of a guessing game. The food industry tries as best it can to interpret "what consumers want" and then provide them for sale in the market place. However, due to the increasing dependency of consumers on the industry to provide "ready-to-eat" meals for their approval, a lot of the responsibility flows back through the system to various parts of the industry. Thus, there is a shared and rather ill defined responsibility for determination of the mix of goods and services available at any point in time.

It has been said by some that what consumers really want is for the food industry to provide them with a package of "Total Nutrition Management" so that they could be assured of proper nutrition for themselves and their families (for a price) and go merrily along with their busy lives. If this is true, it places an awesome responsibility upon the food industry in general and specific firms and groups in particular.

So the challenge boils down to changing diets and changing the food system to meet the new dietary requirements in one order or another.

What we propose to do next is (1) look at three possible scenarios of Nutrient Delivery Systems for 2025 AD; (2) identify the change agent roles for the major players in the system; and (3) close with a section on "Where do we go from here?"

**Nutrient Delivery System – 2025 AD (Three Scenarios)**

1. "Status Quo" — no significant change

This is an easy one to write. All you have to do is take a snapshot of the system as it is today; allow for a few cosmetic changes at the margin; and there we have it. Those individuals with the short range-bottom line mentality would love it. They could plow merrily along making money and enjoying life—while the current consumer's health slowly but steadily deteriorates. The next generation, with the burger, fries and soda mentality, can do little but blindly follow along the fat, salt, sweet trail to a similar fate.

2. "Ideal Diet" Syndrome

At the other end of the dietary spectrum, one can easily visualize a situation where each consuming unit (individual or family) can have an ideal menu (diet-wise) presented to them each morning on their PC screen. With the pressing of a key, they can activate the Nutrient Delivery System, which will deliver the desired meals (to whatever point desired) and deduct the cost from the appropriate bank account electronically. Those people, in transit or with no fixed address, may present themselves to the local "feeding station" where their dietary needs can be analyzed electronically and satisfied on the spot. Theoretically, all of our citizens would have their specific dietary needs met each day. For those who might wonder about group meal events, we all would have smart cards with our specific dietary parameters imprinted upon them and could order our meals on site or in advance over the network.

This may all sound well and good in a dietary sense. However, in a free society, many of us would chafe under such rigid control of our food intake; in spite of the fact that "it's good for us." This next generation will surely involve electronic information systems to a much larger degree than today. But to get to a position of total dietary control is quite a stretch.

3. Improved Diet

Somewhere between these two extremes is a point where the food industry-consumer partnership will deliver a diet which has a minimum of the "bad things" of today's offerings and a maximum of the "good things" that we all require. Consumers will want to minimize the excess fat, salt, cholesterol and sweeteners; but still maintain the taste and fun of the desired diet. Specific definition of the content of the "Improved diet" will have to be worked out by all parties involved. The general concept is presented as a mid-point in the array of possible scenarios. The food industry will somehow find a way to adjust their product offerings to meet these needs and still make an acceptable profit in the bargain. In fact, parts of the food industry have been doing just that. Hopefully it will continue to expand to the total industry system.

**Scenario Summary**

In reality, an infinite number of scenarios could be written here. Those that are presented are examples of what could happen at a future date under widely varying sets of conditions. That is the essence of scenario writing.

**Change Agent Roles — To Get to 2025 AD**

In order to get the desired changes implemented in this situation there are five groups of players that will have roles. These will be briefly discussed in turn.

1. Individual Citizens

People must understand the need for specific dietary changes, support these changes, be willing to make demands for change from the food industry and from the many and varied institutions that impact upon the food supply. A sizeable void in education relative to diet and health needs to be filled at all levels (grade school through college level). Specialization is needed in the area of adult education (young adults through seniors). All types of media must be used (special emphasis on electronic media).

2. Society in General

We get things done through the myriad of institutions in our life (schools, churches, non-profits of all types). Diet and health needs to get high up on the agenda of these organizations.

3. Food Industry

Both individual firms and the trade associations that represent them must put diet and health high upon their agendas as well. The firms will be implementing the specific changes in the product mix offerings and the trade associations will be paving the way to get the job done.

4. Government — At All Levels

Support of educational efforts in diet and health as well as implementing regulatory changes to accommodate the new product offerings can be governments' role in the process. They can also work with other institutions to help get the product changes completed in the first place.

5. Academic Community

There are three major roles to be played in this part of the arena. First is research to improve diet and health of our citizens. Second is the training of educators from kindergarten through university. We once had programs variously titled "Home Economics" in our major universities. Most of the dietary work has been eliminated or replaced by other efforts. Third is the adult education area. Extension once had an extensive network of "Home Economists" whose purview was diet and health among other things. These too have been allowed to dwindle and die on the vine.

**Who Will Pay?**

It is very difficult to put a value on how much improved diet is worth to the well being of our citizenry. Over the long run, a major source of savings to society could be in decreased costs of Medicaid and Medicare plus the private insurance companies. If better diets truly lower the incidences of all the maladies that are claimed, then the savings should be very sizeable, indeed.

A short aside might be instructional here. Twenty-five years ago, if you seriously advocated that the tobacco companies would be hauled into court and agree to pay massive sums of money to cover some of their consumer's medical costs; you would have been laughed off the planet. Consider the possibility twenty-five years hence, of the major food companies being hauled into court

to face the consequences of the "bad diets" they imposed upon their customers, "Outrageous," maybe. But, in our "sue crazy" society, it is possible.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

Given that there are serious dietary problems in this country which command significant changes in the product mix being offered by the food industry system, there are two ingredients that are needed to get the ball rolling. One, the conditions have to be bad enough that a significant proportion of the population and the power structure is dissatisfied and is willing to do something about it. The line that must be crossed in this situation is very elusive. The second has to do with leadership. Who is willing to tackle this issue and devote the time and energy necessary to see it through to completion?

When we find the answers to both of these questions, work can proceed on this project.