

AHEAD OF WHAT'S NEXT

# PROGRESSIVE **GROCER**

## Seeing is Believing

By Barbara Ruhs



One of the perks of my job is the opportunity to visit with food companies and learn firsthand how food is produced and processed.

As a supermarket dietitian, I typically get consumer questions about nutritional quality, ingredients, label claims, processing, safety and sustainability. Plant and farm tours provide a unique opportunity to get direct exposure to how foods are produced. This hands-on knowledge gives me cutting-edge information to confidently answer consumers' questions, address misconceptions about food processing, and translate complex nutrition concepts into easily understood nutrition advice for customers, clients and colleagues.

### **Healthy and Processed: No Oxymoron**

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Kraft Foods, in Northfield, Ill., for a behind-the-scenes educational tour of Kraft Singles. I was delightfully surprised to learn that this "processed" cheese is made predominantly of cheddar cheese and milk.

The processing basically involves liquefying the cheese at high heat before it's individually wrapped, giving it an extended shelf life. Furthermore, Singles contain no artificial preservatives and are naturally colored orange by using paprika and annatto. I feel comfortable recommending this product as a part of a healthy diet.

My goal is to enable shoppers to make healthier choices on any budget. Our food supply is complex, and feeding a world population is something that none of us should take lightly. I'm committed to learning as much as I can about our food to maximize the nutritional choices available to the public.

Fortunately, the education and training for a dietitian is heavily grounded in science, providing a strong foundation of skills to separate fact from fiction. Although some may criticize such industry-sponsored educational events, I welcome these opportunities to get an up-close-and-personal opportunity to learn, ask questions and challenge industry partners to strive for nutritionally sound products.

### **Safe, Healthy and Affordable**

Some of my most memorable experiences have involved getting my hands dirty.

This past summer, I had the good fortune to take farm tours with Chelan Fresh Marketing to learn all about Northwest cherries; with Pacific Coast Producers, in partnership with the "Cans Get You Cooking" program, to learn how tomatoes are grown and processed for canning; and with Grimmway Farms to learn about carrots and industrial vegetable farm production.

Riding tractors, talking with farmers, and experiencing real-time cultivation, processing and sampling have helped make me better equipped to advocate healthy choices.

I'm convinced that if average American shoppers had the good fortune to experience this, they would eat more produce and not think twice about choosing conventionally grown produce ever again. Although some shoppers may feel compelled to pay \$6 for an organic apple, the reality is that most Americans can't afford this, nor do they need to pay so much

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Conventional farmers are using the most sophisticated tools that modern agriculture has to offer to maximize production of high-quality, nutritious food. From GPS-driven tractors to humidity-sensing irrigation systems and integrated pest management, they're as invested in your health as they are in that of the planet.

I'm grateful for many of these eye-opening experiences and hands-on learning opportunities that make me a better dietitian and consumer health advocate.

***Barbara Ruhs, MS, RD, is a dietitian for Chandler, Ariz.-based Bashas' Family of Stores. Follow her on Twitter @EatSmartAZ.***

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