I am a writer so I am going to talk about words today. Let’s start with the word ‘variety’. Hands up all of you who have seen these Kelloggs Variety Packs before. If you have never experienced this particular breakfast treat then you may be an alien or one of the three billion people in the world who are not yet familiar with this product. So, what we see here are eight similar plastic-lined colourful boxes filled with starch derived from products in the food and brewing industries. One of these boxes, for example, contains Sultana Bran, which combines bran from the flour industry and malt combings — this is what gives it that mealy texture — from breweries. The result is sweet and crunchy, and, when you finish you can cut the boxes in half and make puppets which are fun to play with. And by playing you can burn off all that excess sugar you’ve just eaten. So that’s one version of ‘variety’. They all look the same but they are a little bit different.

Here’s another version of variety. Last Thursday I went to a garden in East Keilor where Tony and Lena Siciliano are growing fifteen different varieties of fig on two-and-a-half acres on the banks of Rose Creek. They range from black to white; some of them are russet, others bianco and inverno. There is a slight variation in the species but the difference in taste is amazing. How many of you even knew there are so many varieties of fig?

When I was asked to speak here today I was offered the topic ‘Threats to food diversity and taste’. As soon as I started thinking about that I realized it is not a fifteen-minute talk but rather a whole book. So I decided to just condense it to a few key words. I’m sure that everyone here today thinks it is reasonable to expect ‘healthy’, ‘safe’, ‘cheap’ and ‘tasty’ food. So let’s look at those words and think what happens when the whole nation, indeed the whole world, expects their food to be healthy, safe, cheap and tasty.

**Healthy Food**

The first word I want to look at is ‘healthy’. How many of you think it would be good idea if McDonalds started selling healthy food on their
menu? Surely that would result in healthy food reaching a lot of people. Now I’m not picking on McDonalds for no reason, because they did decide they would put ‘healthy’ food on their menus last year, and in the USA they decided to add an apple dip: ten cold, crisp, peeled slices in a container with a dipping sauce. They developed this product from one particular apple: the *Cameo* variety. Now in the US you can get an apple dish for under a dollar.

But these apples are no ordinary apples. They need to be three inches in diameter, crisp, and not go brown quickly. To get those apples into 13,700 stores requires a steady supply, and the entry of McDonalds into the apple market in the US has prompted big changes for apple growers. Some growers in Washington State switched from other varieties to the *Cameo* in anticipation of this catching on. This means they are changing from *Golden Delicious* and other varieties, for which there is already a proven market. To do this they have to grub out the existing trees or graft the new *Cameo* onto the root stock. It takes two years for the graft to take and then another five years for the trees to get into full production. This means that small farmers, who traditionally carry a range of varieties which ripen at different times to spread their cash flow across the growing season, are making way for speculative growers with access to capital who can afford to let their acres sit until they fill the big orders for McDonalds. Already Washington State alone has seen the number of apple growers drop from 4000 to 2000 over a period of just two years. And here is the ‘good’ news: *Cameo* is more prone to fire blight and needs more constant attention than the older varieties. So for a farmer to be able to go through all the lean years they need very deep pockets indeed.

McDonalds makes this kind of impact, not because it deliberately sets out to screw the system but because it is so massive and demands a uniform product. It is a uniform product at rock-bottom prices based on massive orders with small margins. It is all these small things together that mean that smaller farmers are just not going to be in this market.

**Eating More of Less**

So we started with the word ‘healthy’ and we’ve seen how it can transform things at the other end. Let’s also take the example of ‘healthy pork’. In the 1950s and 1960s people living in western countries got worried about eating fatty pork so they started demanding healthy pork. Farmers started breeding pigs that are nice and lean: the *Landrace* and *Large White* varieties. They are fed meal and slaughtered at an early age. Breeders have reduced the intra-muscular fat from between 10 and 15 per cent down to between 1 and 3 per cent, and people think this is great. At the same time, we have also reduced the flock diversity from more than a dozen different pigs to just two breeds. Other breeds are now extinct. Even in the last fifteen years we lost two breeds: the *Middle Yorkshire White* and the *Welsh*. They are gone and you are not going to eat them anymore. So now we have lean pork, but what’s the point when the flavour is in the fat? You can eat the outside stuff, but that is
not particularly good for you, and there is no flavour left in the middle bit. It’s not tasty and it’s not ‘healthy’ in the sense that the pigs that made it live in abject misery.

We also want ‘healthy’ lean beef, so we buy the cuts that are without fat. But since they are without fat we have to cook them quickly. Because we have to cook them quickly there can’t be any grisly bits (connective tissue), as that takes longer to cook. So beef without fat and without connective tissue means that it is probably yearling (younger) beef and you’ve lost the flavour. We’ve just thrown out centuries of tradition of eating small amounts of flavoursome beef every now and again, and we are eating tasteless lean beef more often.

Cheap Food

Let’s turn now to ‘cheap’ food. I’m sure you all think food should be cheap. I have with me some cheap sausages: about $4 to $5 per kilogram. Did you know that the sausage is one of the most legislated pieces of food in the nation? It has to be because it provides the bulk of animal protein to children under five years of age. The definition of a sausage from Food Safety Standards Australia and New Zealand is that it must contain at least 50 per cent fat-free meat flesh. Now would you eat a sausage that was advertised as 50 per cent fat free, because that means that sausage can also be 50 per cent fat. We are not talking here about good fat—back fat—but rather fat taken from anywhere in that animal that can be mechanically treated so that it more resembles the good mouth-feel fat. By comparison, a good traditional sausage would be a maximum of 30 per cent fat. And that fat would probably be pork back fat, not fat that has been rendered or taken from every other part of the animal.

Now, the meat in this cheap sausage will be mechanically recovered from meat crushers. These machines crush the carcass and then force the pulp through a sieve. Then, to add a bit more meat to it, you will get a bit of minced up pork rind and perhaps some jowels as well. They are not bad meat, but they do have a high bacterial count, so you would probably want to add a bit of sulphur dioxide as well. And you would want to add water because that’s cheaper than fat and meat. However, to hold the water in you would probably need to add some rice meal, and that’s good because it is gluten free. Then you would put some sugar in, so that when you cook it on the barbeque you get a nice browning on the outside. And all that is about $4 a kilogram.

Of course, this is a margins game. You have to be dealing in bulk to think about this sort of production. Our modern transport and food distribution services allow this sort of production to happen at all levels. So imagine if your bread and the biscuits and the tub of butter and the fruit juice and breakfast cereal are all produced like this. Imagine the scale of that sort of production. For instance, the back fat used in these ‘cheap’ sausages is
carted across Australia in big frozen blocks, put it in a freezer for a couple of months and then put through an emulsifier at production. So ‘cheap’ also increases the scale of production.

**Safe Food**

Let’s turn now to ‘safe’. I’m sure you all want safe food. But if you said you want food that is safe from moulds and ‘unsafe’ chemicals then you wouldn’t eat blue cheese for a start. Let me just quote from one cheese producer, Robert Manifold, who spoke to me for an article I had published in *The Age* in 2004. He told me:

> Mount Emu Creek, a great cheese, has vanished from our shelves. Production at the Camperdown Dairy stopped at the end of June. After ten years in business, this popular sheep-milk cheese producer has closed down. Their thick, tangy yoghurt, their marinated fetta and their hallmark *Romani Mature*, a nutty cheese with beautifully balanced sweetness and acidity, are now a thing of the past.

Mount Emu Creek also made a cow-milk cheese in the same manner as the *Romani Mature* and, unfortunately, one of the moulds used in the maturation process was penicillin immune. ‘That mould was indigenous to the old Camperdown cheese and butter factory where the processing plant was located’, said Manifold. ‘It made its way into the cloth binding; it did not penetrate the rind’.

Moulds are used every day in cheese, but they can also be associated with production of fungal poisons. The dairy authorities placed a ban on the cloth-bound cheeses produced by Mount Emu Creek in February 2003. They lifted the ban shortly afterwards, but at that stage Robert Manifold was shifting from the Camperdown factory to a new purpose-built facility that would be unable to use the naturally occurring moulds used at the old butter factory site. So he didn’t bother to reopen the old cheese and butter factory again. Now you can’t buy all that lovely stuff. It’s gone. Goodbye. All in the name of ‘safety’.

I could also talk about the ageing of meat to increase flavour. But you can’t leave meat ‘on the hook’ in butcher shops any more because you might get mould on it and the health authorities might close your business down. You don’t want ‘cowboys’ in the meat trade, do you?

**Anyone for Juice?**

Time is running out so I will just give one last example, where ‘tasty’, ‘healthy’ and ‘cheap’ all come together. I have here some orange juice made from the juice of oranges that were grown in Brazil. It has been pasteurized and then put through reverse osmosis filters to remove water. The concentrate is shipped to Australia and we dilute it with our own water. It is not made with great oranges that might have the right sugar and acid balance, so it has to be made sweeter. This is not done by adding sugar but
by adding Vitamin C because ascorbic acid actually makes it taste sweeter. Vitamin C is an anti-oxidant and it extends the shelf life of the product. That makes it more profitable and safer, and at the same time you have that big ‘Vitamin C’ picture on the front of that label, so it looks appealing because it feels like it’s healthier. So, you end up buying chemically enhanced juice that doesn’t actually taste like ‘real’ juice.

Anyway, I’ve got all these products here and if anyone wants them feel free to take them. But you can’t have the pumpkin I bought this morning at the Farmers Market. That one is mine!

Richard Cornish is a freelance television producer, food writer and sausage expert. Farm boy by birth, city dweller by economic necessity, he writes food articles that highlight the connection between the land, producer, chef and consumer. Richard is also member of The Age Good Food Guide editorial panel.