
What are we going to eat this summer?

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If we want to change the population's eating habits, we need to understand why we eat the way we do.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

In March 2023, the revised Nordic Nutrition Recommendations were released for public consultation [\(1\)](#).

The recommendations are based on knowledge summaries of several thousand scientific studies. Almost 400 external international researchers have been involved in the work at various stages [\(1\)](#). Nevertheless, as soon as the draft for consultation was released, the discord began. Some argued vociferously that the recommendations did not go far enough in warning against ultra-processed food, leading to strong opposition from others [\(2\)](#). Predictably, the advice to reduce the consumption of red meat was rather difficult to digest for certain industry stakeholders [\(3\)](#).

Even the minister responsible for food allowed herself to be provoked. Minister of Agriculture and Food, Sandra Borch, had previously stated that dinner without meat is not dinner [\(4\)](#). Now she says she is 'very sceptical' of the work, that the recommended limits for meat consumption were merely a 'number plucked out of the air', and she said she would not lift a finger to reduce Norwegian meat production – regardless of what the dietary guidelines say [\(5\)](#).

The Minister's reaction fully illustrates that nutritional recommendations are not like other health recommendations. No one would ever have thought of calling the Norwegian Directorate of Health's evidence-based advice to take 30 minutes of daily physical exercise just a 'number plucked out of the air' [\(6\)](#). But recommendations about food involve so much more than nutrition policy; they also encompass, for instance, business and agricultural policy and commercial interests.

What we choose to eat is determined by much more than the advice in an evidence-based nutrition recommendation. Our eating behaviour and habits are shaped in a complex interaction of cultural, social and individual factors. Notably, our overall sensory experience of food, i.e. flavour perception, is crucial [\(7\)](#). During a meal, smell, sight, touch, taste and hearing converge in a sensorium commune of well-being [\(8\)](#). We do not generally eat for the purpose of reaping future health benefits; we eat because we have a desire for food. It is a hedonistic need buried deep in our brain, as it facilitates survival by enticing us to repeat the act of eating [\(9\)](#).

«We eat because we have a desire for food»

Our food choices are formed in a subconscious and complex interplay between sensory experiences, the brain's reward centres, past experiences and genetically determined taste preferences [\(10\)](#). This influences what we eat at least as much as evidence-based advice about sensible eating. The Minister who insists on sticking to her meat menu 'regardless of what the dietary guidelines say', is a prime example of this [\(5\)](#).

In the nearly 200-page draft of the revised Nordic Nutrition Recommendations, the word 'taste' appears only once [\(1\)](#). As does the word 'flavour'. Perhaps this is where the biggest problem with all nutrition recommendations lies. Because the guidelines based on the collective recommendations of 400 international experts will be woefully inadequate if we fail to understand why some people will never follow them. With no consideration to the most central value of a meal – the sensory experience – the recommendations fall short. Who knows what trace elements taste like? Who is able to smell vitamins?

The consultation deadline has passed, and the final version of the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations is about to be released. The new Norwegian dietary guidelines will be ready in the autumn. In the meantime, what should our summer food consist of? The American science journalist Michael Pollan has been following nutrition research for many decades. In 2008, he summarised international nutrition research in seven simple words that still hold true – and will perhaps also satisfy all sides of the debate on the new nutrition recommendations: 'Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.' ⁽¹¹⁾ We could also add: Enjoy your meals, using all your senses. Bon appétit.

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