

## Till Mold Do Us Part

Why a new study discrediting food sell-by dates is going to save my marriage



YOU MAKE A LOT of compromises in a marriage, such as being married. We permit behavior from our spouses that we wouldn't tolerate from anyone else, such as throwing out our food. Doing this just one time to a co-worker causes a barrage of Post-it notes more vitriolic than anything Tupac would have stuck inside Biggie's fridge. Like "To the thief who ate half of my tuna sandwich: I have mouth herpes. Now you do too. I'm anonymously e-mailing your wife to warn her about your mouth herpes. And your tuna breath."

But when my lovely wife Cassandra dumps all the food that's past its expiration date, I just take it. I use the balsamic vinegar I keep in the back of the pantry quickly and stealthily, before she sees the use-by date on it, which is 2010. I feel certain, though, that vinegar can't go bad, since vinegar is something else that's already gone bad. The worst thing that could happen to vinegar is that it would be more vinegary.

I've been emboldened, however, by a new National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Harvard Law School study that recommends eliminating sell-by dates on food because they're so misleading. The dates were created by local and state organizations in the 1970s merely to help people know when the products are freshest—not safest—and even that is basically a guess. In fact, they

never say *expiration*, instead using words such as *use by*, *best before*, *sell by*, *enjoy by* and, in the case of kale and quinoa, *won't be trendy after*. This confusion is one of the reasons the average American family of four tosses \$1,560 of edible food annually. It's also part of why we waste 10 times as much food as Southeast Asians. And that's despite the fact that they mostly eat with chopsticks while we mostly eat with our hands.

Dana Gunders, a staff scientist at the NRDC who worked on the study, told me that 15% to 25% of the food we buy isn't consumed, which means that by tweaking our behavior slightly, Americans could be 15% to 25% more obese. Alternatively, we could save a lot of water and energy. Food poisoning, she said, comes from contamination, not spoilage. Sure, in the 1970s people may have needed some help figuring out if food turned, but we use a lot less drugs now.

Gunders suggested I try to win over Cassandra slowly, first by keeping yogurt for an extra couple of days and then by explaining that eggs are good a month after their date and tortilla chips (which can be refreshed in the oven) for years. I asked Gunders what the last item she tossed was, and she said it was a jar of pasta sauce that she scraped the mold off of only to find a thicker layer of mold underneath it. This was the kind of talk I would pay a woman \$1.75 a minute for.

For advice on talking to

Cassandra, I called my dad to find out how he failed to persuade two wives, my sister and every guest he's ever had to eat food in his house without multiple-party inspection. I have reconstructed—one aluminum-foil-wrapped slice at a time—multiple complete pizzas from my dad's refrigerator, along with half my sister's bat mitzvah cake when she was already in college.

Before I could find out his methods of nonpersuasion, my dad got excited that this new study might finally uncover the corruption of both the food and pharmaceutical industries. He said he's never gotten sick from food in his own home and that during the Vietnam War, the Army gave him perfectly effective aspirin that was left over from the Korean War. He suggested I call cereal companies

and ask them their scientific process for arriving at their dates, which he doubted existed. Then he changed his mind. "You're touching the third rail, pal," he said. "You've got to be careful about how strong you make this argument." Never before did I realize just how little real journalism I do.

Kellogg's did not return my e-mail, and General Mills, afraid of giving away "competitive information," would say only that its "better if used by" dates are "based on sensory evaluations" by "product developers and expert tasters," which, admittedly, would seem a lot less suspicious without all those quotation marks. Still, I think I've got a good chance of winning some kind of journalism award.

Finally, I told Cassandra about the study, and to my great disappointment, she agreed. "O.K.," she said, "Now that I know eggs are good a month after, I'll keep them." I felt an emptiness you get when a boxing match has been canceled and you also don't get to go on and on to your wife about your superior logic, ability to set economic priorities and love of our planet.

Then, a few days later, Cassandra said she wanted me to smell something to see if it had gone bad, since those sell-by dates were not to be trusted. It was buttermilk, a food that always smells bad. I kissed her and thanked her. She cared enough to fight after all.

