

A reporter weaves an excited path through the department store, presenting his valuable finds to the camera. Yet another mark-down campaign has begun. Reaching the food section, he's at his most animated, proclaiming: "We're never more price-sensitive than when it comes to food! So let's see what one euro will get us!" And with the glint of victory in his eye, he seizes a bag of crisps.

As I write this, it's an early Sunday evening. I spent the morning picking fresh, late autumn raspberries in the garden and filling a basket with tomatoes and cucumber and sweet pepper from the greenhouse. I made pancakes with jam for breakfast and had a glass of milk with them, then baked eight loaves of bread before packing them into the car. For lunch everyone in the house enjoyed my home-made borscht, glittering gold and red. And now it's a beautiful, crisp autumn evening. Not only that, it's World Food Day. And what that reporter said springs to mind again and again, sadly typical of most people's attitude to food.

But what did he actually say? True, food prices, like the prices of other things we can't do without in life, have gone up all over the world. And it's this rise in prices that's the reason people so often go for the cheapest thing they see on the shelf. Saving money where you can makes sense. But even if you *are* sensitive to prices, you can still choose purer, healthier food – provided you don't just shrug your shoulders when it comes to what your food contains. Estonian producers are worried about the choices local consumers make, since on the whole they pay little or no attention to what's in the food they're eating or where it's made. And yet these are the same people who will almost always check the label on an item of clothing before they buy it to see what it's made from and who made it. When they stop to get petrol, they make sure they're getting the cleanest sort. Thoughts like these though tend to fall by the wayside as soon as they set foot inside the supermarket. But our health, how we feel, how productive we are in our jobs, even our moods – all of these depend to a large extent on what we eat. And in the case of kids, what they eat determines their future.

There's been a lot of talk about food around the world in the last few months. For the second time in its history, the UN discussed the global health crisis at its most recent general assembly, with a focus on non-infectious diseases. Which is to say those brought on by our way of life: the food we eat, what we drink, the exercise we do (or don't do) and the environment we live in. Mass producers never tire of repeating the mantra that people on low incomes can't afford to buy anything other than cheap, processed food, but that's not true, as was proven recently in the same month in the New York Times in America and the Financial Times in Europe: both showed, with figures to back them up, that if we make our own food from scratch at home, it costs us less than buying processed or fast food. Not to mention the benefits and quality involved.

And when you actually delve into the contents of processed food, you realise that the much vaunted ‘cheap’ tag isn’t actually cheap at all. Out of interest I calculated how much it would cost to buy the meat that goes into sausages compared to buying real meat instead. The results didn’t surprise me: the cost of the meat that makes up roughly 51% of the average wiener you might feed your kids was almost to a cent exactly the same as the per-kilo price of the cheapest pork and beef (around €5.50). The only difference, of course, is that if you go for the processed sausage you’re also going to end up with the other 49% of it, which is modified starch, diphosphates, triphosphates, polyphosphates (obtained, or so I’ve heard, from phosphorite, which can cause thinning of the bones), carrageenan, sodium ascorbate, sodium nitrate and carmine colouring (obtained from the female scale insect and which may be linked to hyperactivity)*. On top of that, there’s water, pork lard and rind, starch, salt and flavouring. The law doesn’t require labels to list processing agents, carrier substances or solvents, and we have no idea whether products contain medicinal or toxic plant residue.

So the list is long, and it’s not like we’d ever stock these things in our pantries. But so you don’t have to spend an enormous amount of time making healthy choices at the supermarket, a number of really useful books have been published. One of the most straightforward of renowned American journalist Michael Pollan’s food books has even been translated into Estonian. From it I’ve taken these three recommendations for a healthy life:

1. Eat food, not things designed to look like food. For example, if the basis of what you’re eating is a plant, it should be fine to eat; if it’s a factory, it’s best to avoid it.
2. Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognise as food.
3. Make it yourself.

That last recommendation holds the formula that will solve all of our healthy eating problems. And once you’ve been following all three for long enough, you can sometimes make an exception – bearing in mind that the greatest riches you can have in life are not dollars and cents, but good health.

**The information used in the article about the additives found in processed food was sourced from www.food-info.net.*