Why Eat Raisins?

A recent issue of The Journal called attention to the current extravagance, if it may be so designated, of advertising which is intended to secure increased use of a variety of articles of food. So far as this procedure aims to call attention to the dietary value or culinary excellence of special brands of products or to types of less well known edible substances, there is in general little occasion for criticism. Even the ancients lauded their specialties; and there can be no harm in announcing the availability of choice citrus fruits or particularly palatable and wholesome ready-to-eat cereals or either a novel or staple dietary article which has been made purchasable in some unusually acceptable or sanitary form. Foods, like clothes and soaps and kitchen utensils, have legitimate advertising virtues. When, however, the promotor attempts to foist alleged unique qualities of his pet product indiscriminately upon the public under claims of specific therapeutic or health-promoting potency, the medical profession is warranted in giving critical consideration to the subject.

Within the last few weeks, raisins have been lauded in the advertising columns as “the iron food for vitality.” The “food iron” of this dried fruit is represented as the “true beauty food” with which to regale the “pale, tired women,” etc., etc. The reader is further told in some of the statements that “physicians know that value of the raisin.” This fruit, which most persons know as a delicious morsel usually eaten by those who enjoy it for the sake of its palatability, thus is at once put into a class with Nuxated Iron, Ironized Yeast, and other familiar “tonics.” What are some of the known facts, as distinguished from advertising fictions, about raisins?

According to the analyses compiled by Sherman, raisins with an iron content of 0.002 per cent. of the edible portion represent no superiority over many of the commonest cereals which enter into the daily diet. Of the edible portion represent no superiority over many of the commonest cereals which enter into the daily diet. Some of the edible nuts have even better claim to distinction as “iron foods.” The legumes which we consume as peas and beans are far richer in iron than are raisins, in contrast to which, further, spinach and meat and eggs would present an enviable iron record. Why cite more data? Indeed, one might well ask: “Why raisins?”

Even if the presence of an “average” amount of iron in raisins be admitted at the outset, there is no evidence that raisin-iron is absorbed better than the iron in other staples of everyday diet, if, indeed, it is absorbed to any extent whatever. Sherman has observed that, in healthy persons in whom the intake and output of iron have been determined, the requirement appears to have varied with individuals and the nature of the diet from 6 to 16 mg. of iron per man daily. He concludes from these results that a daily allowance of from 10 to 12 mg. of food iron should suffice for the maintenance of iron equilibrium in an average man under favorable conditions; but until the conditions which determine a larger metabolism of iron are more clearly defined, it would seem desirable to set a higher standard, perhaps 15 mg. of food iron per man daily. One hundred grams (more than three ounces) of raisins would furnish at most about 2 mg. of iron, even on the unlikely assumption that the element is completely rendered available in the digestion of a semidigestible fruit of this type. Thus the mathematics of diet sometimes tells important truths.

The raisin propaganda further tells the public, i.e., everybody, that “you’ll want this food every morning.” Such statements may work positive harm. There are, as every physician and many laymen know, persons whose alimentary tracts cannot at all times endure the ingestion of fruits which furnish a considerable amount of indigestible residue. The medical profession, as the guardian of the public health, must resent dietotherapeutic advice that may be detrimental to unsuspecting patients who are publicly assured that “the physician knows the value of raisins.” Let us hope that the raisin may continue to bring joy to the palate in the future as—unheralded—it has in the past. Our quarrel is not with a wholesome food, but with unwarranted, unwise and misleading advice.

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