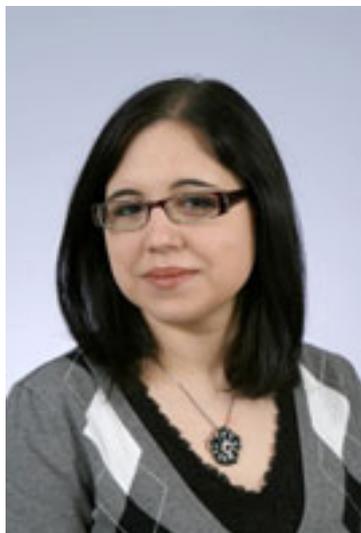


# Your Brain Wants Chocolate Cake



By KRYSTAL GABERT, Associate Editor, Food Manufacturing

When your eyes dart between the grilled cheese and the salad bar during your lunch break, what are you really thinking about? How do you decide between the real-fruit sorbet and the chocolate cake? We recently ran [a video from CBS news](#) [1], which suggests that the reasons we choose to eat what we choose to eat may be more complicated than they seem at first glance.

Whenever I read an article about health and consumption trends in the U.S., the comments section is inevitably filled with brilliant observations announcing that if Americans ate more healthily, they wouldn't be as fat. Okay... noted. While this is undeniably true, it's also an incredibly boring and completely surface-level analysis of what are complex relationships—both individual and collective—with food. I think the key to making better food choices may well lie in our understanding of why we're making the ones we're making now.

In [this episode of WNYC's Radiolab](#) [2], the hosts walk listeners through a scientific study in which two groups of people were given numbers to memorize—the first group was given a 7-digit number, the second group a 2-digit number. Then subjects were told to walk down the hall and tell their numbers to someone in a different room. On the way to do that, participants were stopped by someone offering them free snacks—a giant piece of chocolate cake or a bowl of fruit salad. Nearly everyone in the 7-digit group chose the cake, and almost all of the participants in the 2-digit group chose the fruit. Scientists think that this happens because the “rational, deliberative systems” in our brains are activated in order to do complex tasks—like memorizing long strings of information. That same part of the brain is the rational voice that tells you to eat fruit not cake. So the “rational systems” of the 7-digiters were too busy trying to remember their numbers to calculate that a giant piece of chocolate cake would taste good now and make them fat later. This could easily explain the “stress eating” phenomenon. Who hasn't

## Your Brain Wants Chocolate Cake

Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

---

absentmindedly—and that word seems awfully appropriate in this context now—eaten seven cookies while preparing a presentation or frantically rushing to finish a project by deadline?

Additionally, [this recent article published by BBC News](#) [3] suggests that children who suffer from depression are more likely to eat sweets. One of the researchers cited in the article says that “sweet taste is rewarding to all kids and makes them feel good.” So it would follow that kids who generally feel bad would use sweets to elevate their normal-functioning mood level. This seems especially likely given that sugar, in particular, has proven effects on the brain as well.

And on a larger, cultural level, I think it’s worth mentioning that those of us who live in developed and industrialized countries interact with food in a different way than our species ever has in history. The idea of food as anything other than nourishment and the complete lack of worry surrounding its availability are new luxuries that have led to entirely different kinds of connections with what we eat. Like all cultural adjustments, learning the boundaries surrounding this new relationship to what we eat will take some time, and some of us will go a little crazy while we hammer out all the details.

These are just a few of the complexities that affect our behaviors with regard to health and food. It’s worth noting that the food industry exists to meet the demands of public consumption. But I don’t think that means we should simply say, “The people demand deep-fried butter! Serve it up!” Sure, if the huddled masses are clamoring for artery-clogging snacks, then someone will surely be willing to sell them to us, but while that’s happening, I think it’s useful to open a public dialog about how and why we eat what we do. While I’m not sure what the practical form of such a conversation would look like, if we can uncover some of the keys to re-learning healthy ways to interact with food, when we all start clamoring for carrot sticks and hummus, the food industry will be there to meet that demand, too.

*What do you think? Let me know: [krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com](mailto:krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com) [4].*

**Source URL (retrieved on 12/05/2013 - 7:53pm):**

<http://www.chem.info/blogs/2010/02/your-brain-wants-chocolate-cake>

### Links:

[1] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/scripts/Products-Food-For-Thought-VIDEO.asp>

[2] <http://www.wnyc.org/flashplayer/player.html#/play//stream/xspf/111029>

[3] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8506758.stm>

[4] <mailto:krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com>