

CHAVEZ PROTESTS LETTUCE LISTING

Agriculture Agency Said
to Promote Boycotted Food

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 30—An Agriculture Department promotion of lettuce as one of this month's "plentiful foods" has sparked a protest from Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers Union that is trying to enforce a boycott against iceberg lettuce not picked by members of his union.

Mr. Chavez's protest, which took the form of a letter to the Secretary of Agriculture, was on political grounds. But, to staff members of the department's "plentiful foods" program, it was only the most recent evidence of how food becomes an emotional issue for reasons having nothing to do with its taste.

As it happens, iceberg, of all the available varieties of lettuce, is the national favorite, possibly because it wilts the least of any in transit.

But other foods, from tuna fish to ripe olives, have sparked similar protests, according to Mrs. Joyce Short, assistant to the director of the "plentiful foods" program.

The aim of the program, she said, is to promote foods whose supply is expected—they work about six weeks in advance—to exceed the normal demand, generally for climatic reasons.

Lettuce was on the current list as one of the food items "to look for"—"sweet corn, cucumbers, lettuce and tomatoes will be available in general ample supply," was the wording, according to Mrs. Short. Lettuce was also touted on one of the department's similar Spanish-language good-buying radio tapes.

Mr. Chavez, in protesting, charged that Dr. Earl L. Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture, had "become nothing more than an agent of the growers."

A department spokesman, replying to Mr. Chavez's charges, said that the department's role was to "just lay out the facts about what foods are plentiful," adding, "It's up to users to decide if they want to buy."

Dispute on Cholesterol

When eggs were on the "plentiful foods" list at the height of the period when cholesterol was being criticized by many doctors, there were complaints that the program was promoting heart disease.

"But the Agriculture Department took the stand that there was evidence on both sides" of the dispute about the significance of cholesterol as a causative agent, she said.

June, promoted by the department as "dairy month," generally provokes similar outcry, Mrs. Short said. And listings of tuna and swordfish evoke howls of "mercury" contamination.

The customer's memory is a long one, judging by the fact that a listing of cranberries, according to Mrs. Short, will still anger those who recall the cranberries-cause-cancer scare of 1957-1958.

And a listing of ripe olives led to a number of angry inquiries about why the department was pushing ripe olives, of all things. The answer was that there are a number of farmers whose livelihoods depend on the sale of their olives, and the department's primary function is to help the farmer.

Sometimes a glut problem will be only statewide, as in Michigan, where there were more green apples than anyone knew what to do with. The program got to work, and soon, Mrs. Short said, "had everybody making pies."

The table-grape boycott led by Mr. Chavez, which was ultimately successful in forcing holdout growers to sign union contracts, also produced a flood of protest against the listing of grapes that Mrs. Short characterized as "hysterical."

But a totally nonpolitical issue, such as trying to tamper with the tradition that turkeys are as seasonal as oysters, only more so—the turkey season being limited, in the minds of many, to the fourth Thursday in November—touched hidden sensitivity.

Responding to the turkey farmers' plight, the program tried to convince people "that you can barbecue a turkey in July," Mrs. Short said, and added, "some people thought that was heresy."

Backing for the lettuce boycott came today from the United States Catholic Conference, described by a spokesman as "the action agency" of the American Roman Catholic bishops.

The conference, in a release, announced that the Most Rev. Raymond Gallagher of Lafayette, Ind., the chairman of the conference's Committee on Social Development, asked the bishops to "publicly express support of the farm workers' cause," suggesting that Labor Day masses would be a "particularly appropriate" time to do so.

The committee endorsed the boycott last June, asking that only iceberg lettuce with a United Farm Workers label be purchased.

The New York Times

Published: August 31, 1972

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