Study: Food stamps keep people out of poverty

By Nancy Shute, NPR

Food stamps have long been are a favorite whipping boy of politicians looking to beat up on government spending. But the massive food-assistance program does help keep people out of poverty, according to new research.

Food stamp benefits led to decline of 4.4 percent in poverty from 2000 to 2009, according to a new report from the USDA's Economic Research Service.

The impact was particularly strong for children, who are more likely to live in poverty than adults. Child poverty was reduced by 15.5 percent, on average. The researchers also looked at the depth and severity of poverty, and found that severity was reduced by 21 percent. They say looking at this gives a better measure of the role of food stamps in improving the lives of Americans, compared to just a straight look at the poverty rate.

In 2009, 21 percent of all children, or 15.5 million, lived in poverty. That's up from 16 percent in 2001, an increase attributed to the economic downturn.And that's including the buffering effect of food stamps.

Read the whole story

Study: Plastic wrappers seeping into food products

By Susan Freinkel, Washington Post

In a study published last year in the journal Environmental Health Perspectives, researchers put five San Francisco families on a three-day diet of food that hadn't been in contact with plastic. When they compared urine samples before and after the diet, the scientists were stunned to see what a difference a few days could make: The participants' levels of bisphenol A (BPA), which is used to harden polycarbonate plastic, plunged – by two-thirds, on average – while those of the phthalate DEHP, which imparts flexibility to plastics, dropped by more than half.

The findings seemed to confirm what many experts suspected: Plastic food packaging is a major source of these potentially harmful chemicals, which most Americans harbor in their bodies. Other studies have shown phthalates (pronounced THAL-ates) passing into food from processing equipment and food-prep gloves, gaskets and seals on non-plastic containers, inks used on labels – which can permeate packaging – and even the plastic film used in agriculture.

The government has long known that tiny amounts of chemicals used to make plastics can sometimes migrate into food. The Food and Drug Administration regulates these migrants as "indirect food additives" and has approved more than 3,000 such chemicals for use in food-contact applications since 1958. It judges safety based on models that estimate how much of a given substance might end up on someone's dinner plate. If the concentration is low enough (and when these substances occur in food, it is almost always in trace amounts), further safety testing isn't required.

Read the whole story

’11 vintage has winemakers apprehensive; ’10 looks OK

By Kathryn Reed

SOMERSET – Take a bottle of Zinfandel from any two years and they won’t taste the same. In large part that is because the weather wasn’t the same those two years.

While winemakers can work some magic with fermentation and blending, Mother Nature plays a huge role in what comes out of the bottle. But there is usually a consistency in flavors from an individual winery. The exception plays out with extreme weather. The 2011 vintage may just be that exception. The answer will be known down the road.

With the last two years being wetter and cooler than normal, many wineries in El Dorado County are certain the flavors will be less fruit-forward than years past. And the number of bottles will likely be less for 2011 because some of the grapes could not be harvested.



Wineries are hoping the 2012 harvest

is better than a year ago. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The area received 60 to 70 inches of rain the previous two winters. About 26 inches have fallen this winter. Pam Miller with Single Leaf Winery said 30 inches is what the vines like to have.

“We lost an enormous amount of crop last year,” Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Zinfandel, which by the ton is the No. 2 grape in El Dorado County behind Cabernet, has a thin skin. Bunch rot can set in quickly. Then the season is over.

“I’m very reluctant to speak of 2011. Some is OK, some will take a lot more cellar work,” Single Leaf winemaker Scott Miller said.



Scott Miller, right, of Single Leaf talks about his wines with Pam Valentine and Tom Ward.

However, both Millers are excited with how the 2010s are coming out. Some started to be bottled a couple weeks ago. The Zins won’t be released for three years, but the Barbera will be out late summer.

“Our ’10s are just spectacular,” Pam Miller said.

Elliot Graham at Busby Cellars told *Lake Tahoe News* the 2010 and 2011 vintages are not going to have big fruity flavors.

“2010 and ’11 are different than any (before) because it never got warm,” Graham said. “So, it will be a different style.”

He is starting to bottle some of the 2010 vintage.

At Skinner winery the 2010 Mourvedre was being poured during the first weekend of Passport – the annual two-weekend wine tasting put on by El Dorado Winery Association. Only 800 acres of this varietal are planted in California, with 3 acres belonging to Skinner.



Elliot Graham of Busby is cautiously optimistic about 2010 and 2011.

“We are excited by the ’10 whites,” Chris Pittenger, Skinner winemaker, said. “They are pretty elegant wines.”

He’s in the process of doing blending trials with the reds.

Pittenger isn’t sure how the 2011 vintage will fare, but said

with the similarity of weather to 2010, it might be better than people anticipate.

John Latcham, winemaker at Latcham Winery, is optimistic what ends ups in the bottle from 2011 will be good, but he shakes his head thinking about what it took to make it through the harvest.

“Last year was a devastating year to the wine industry. We were picking between raindrops,” Latcham said. “We literally handpicked every bunch.”

That takes time and is an expensive process.

His crew was out there regularly putting down a mildew spray. But the rains came and just washed it away. It became a daily application.

The most upbeat winemaker was Rich Rorden at Cantiga.

“I’ve never witnessed a bad year, just differences,” Rorden said. “If all the wines tasted the same, we would be Gallo. The weather always plays a role, but the grapes always ripen.”

Facts from El Dorado County’s 2010 harvest (the most current year available):

- $4.9 million, the total value of grapes based on average open market prices
- 2,200 acres of wine grapes (this is twice the acreage of 12 years ago)
- $1,279, average price per ton of wine grapes. This was a slight increase compared to 2009.
- 4,700 tons, amount of wine grapes grown.

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Info:

Tickets are still available for Passport by going online. They are $70, which includes the whole weekend – April 21-22. Thirty-two wineries are participating. The event is 11am-5pm each day.

Salt content in U.S. fast food outweighs other countries

By Nancy Shute, NPR

Want extra salt with that fast-food meal? Then buy it in the United States, where chicken dishes, pizzas, and even salads are loaded with far more salt than in Europe and Australia, according to new research.

The McDonald's Chicken McNuggets in the United States have more than twice as much salt as their sister nuggets in the United Kingdom That's 1.6 grams of salt for every 100 grams of American nugget, compared to 0.6 grams in the U.K.

You could say Americans are getting more for their money. You could also say they're getting more high blood pressure and premature death.

McNuggets sold in Canada were about as salty as those in the U.S., while Australian, French, and Kiwi nuggets had significantly less salt, but not as little as in the U.K.

That may be because the United Kingdom has set voluntary limits on salt in processed food, according to Elizabeth

Dunford. She’s the lead author of this study, which was published today in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, and global database manager for the Australian arm of World Action on Salt and Health.

Read the whole story

Hot and sweet combine for mouthful of fun at salsa contest

By Kathryn Reed

TWIN BRIDGES – Take small bites. That was the advice of Dennis, veteran Sierra-at-Tahoe salsa judge. Still, my tongue was numb for a bit of the contest.

With 19 concoctions to taste, it was a good thing several criteria are involved to come up with a possible total score of 50. However, flavor-taste is the biggie – with a possible 20 points. Overall impression is the next biggest point factor with 10 being the most that can be awarded. Up to five points were give for color-appearance, aroma, originality, and spice blend.

It reminded me a bit of wine tasting – just no spitting. Instead of swirl, smell, sip, spit, it was look, smell, taste, swallow.



Lake Tahoe News Publisher Kathryn Reed tries to decide if she likes this salsa. Photo/Susan Wood

Looking at the various salsas lined up in front of me it seemed a bit daunting. What if I wanted to spit? All those people watching and the maker in the crowd – better just smile.

But this was serious business. The stakes were high. The winner of the traditional and fruit categories would go home with a 2012-13 season pass to Sierra.

There are some wonderful salsa makers out there. My favorite for the traditional was called The World's Best. I wasn't alone. It was awarded the best in that class.

Shane Hammett, the maker of The World's Best, won two years ago, too.

"Like it lots, including the kick. Woo-hoo," is what I wrote during the Sunday afternoon contest.

For the fruity segment, my favorite was the Kiwi Kicker Mango

Madness created by Dave Young. It had fruit and heat mixed together for a fantastic blend of flavors. The winning salsa was West Bowl Special by Leah Rademacher. However, because Rademacher wasn't there to claim her prize, the season pass went to Young.

Other judges, for the April 15 event were Dennis – lift operations manager at Sierra, Hugh – ski patrol, Jeff – security, and Lauren – marketing.

Tips for next year's salsa makers – the pureed ones don't do well on presentation, so that could be a loss of five points from the start. Most of the fruit is mango, so perhaps a different fruit should be used – watermelon if you could find one this time of year, and pineapple are ideas. The Ish scored high especially with Hugh and me when it came to aroma. That smokiness was definitely intriguing and unique. Only a couple tomatillo salsas were entered, so that is a choice that could be exploited a bit. Too much salt in a couple salsas had them receiving low scores for taste.

But these are just one judge's comments. I'm thinking I might take this insider info and enter the contest next year.

While Sierra's West Bowl is now closed, the other side of the mountain is open through next weekend. Too bad West Bowl won't be open this week – the skiing there on Sunday was as good as the salsa.

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Learn about the basics of wine tasting

Rick Kushman, wine and food writer and educator, will teach a Wine 101 class called “Why Wine is More Fun Than People Make it Seem” on May 12 from 1:30-3pm at Lava Cap Winery in Placerville.

Kushman will cover how to get more out of a wine country experience and drinking wine. Learn tips on tasting – and practice with Lava Cap wines – discover keys to grape growing and winemaking, and why any of that matters.

He’ll also decode some of the more annoying “wine speak” and offers pointers on how not to be a wine snob, even accidentally.

Tickets are $25 per person. Seating is limited. To purchase tickets, call (530) 621.0175.

Some salsa judges like it hot, hot, hot

I like hot salsa. That’s all I’m going to say.

Oh, and I’m going to be a judge at the salsa contest April 15 at Sierra-at-Tahoe. But I’m only one of five judges, so this piece of insider information may not help.



Judges at Sierra's 2011 salsa contest. Photo/LTN file

But it might be worth your while to start mixing up a batch of salsa. A 2012-13 season pass goes to the winner of "traditional" and "fruity" varieties. Contestants need to bring 2 cups of homemade salsa to West Bowl by 10am Sunday, and specify what category they are entering.

For those who don't want to do the salsa bit, there will be pinatas for kids and adults, a taco eating contest ($5 entry fee for five tacos), and live music.

– Kathryn Reed

Quinoa goes from staple in Andean culture to U.S. superfood

By Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, Time

As a child, Benjamin Huarachi, 55, ate quinoa almost every day, as a matter of practicality. The crop is one of few that thrive on Bolivia's high plains, 13,000 ft. (4,000 m) above

sea level, explains the farmer. His impoverished family had no idea that the colorful tall tufts yield one of the healthiest foods on the planet. Nor did Huarachi imagine that his childhood staple would one day bring economic success. “Quinoa was always comida para los indios [food for Indians],” he says, almost laughing, “Today it’s food for the world’s richest.”

Over the past decade, the “Andean superfood” has become a pinnacle product for First World foodies. Often mistaken for a grain, quinoa is actually a chenopod (cousin to a beet); rich in minerals, it’s the only vegetable that’s a complete protein. To the added delight of politically correct health nuts, it’s produced by small-scale Andean farmers like Huarachi who reap direct benefits of its international popularity. Recently, those benefits have skyrocketed: quinoa’s price has tripled since 2006, triggering a boom in the poorest region of South America’s poorest country. “Now we’ve got tractors for our fields and parabolic antennas for our homes,” says Huarachi, who’s also a board member of Bolivia’s largest quinoa-growers association, ANAPQUI.

Growers relish in the moment and the attendant prosperity. “My quinoa sells like hotcakes,” says Fidencia Huayllas, grinning. She’s spent her boom cash on expanding her mud-and-brick home. Seventy percent of the region’s high school graduates can now afford to attend university, Huarachi says, “thanks to quinoa.” He leans forward, face brightening: “In 1983, 100 lb. of quinoa sold for 25 bolivianos – the price a T-shirt. Now that sack goes for $100 [700 bolivianos]. That’s a lot of T-shirts.”

But the windfall could become a double-edged sword. In February, violence over prime quinoa-growing territory left dozens injured, and land conflict is spreading. “Sure, the price of quinoa is increasing,” says Carlos Nina, a local

leader in Bolivia’s quinoa heartland, “but so are our problems.” Apart from increasing feuds over property rights, these include the collapse of the traditional relationship between llama herding and soil fertilization, with potentially disastrous consequences of quinoa’s “organic” status, and the ironic twist that the children of newly prosperous farmers no longer like eating quinoa, contributing to dietary problems.

According to historians, quinoa cultivation originated in the Altiplano around 3,000 B.C. Legend says it was a gift from the gods to the indigenous Aymara: a highly nutritious crop as small compensation for being saddled with one of earth’s harshest climates. (It’s an easy story to believe, since only divine intervention seems to explain how anything could sprout from the high plateau’s rocky, sandy soil.)

The present from the heavens has always been a base of the Andean diet, but only recently did the crop begin its international journey. In 1993, NASA researchers recommended it as part of a potential space-colony diet. Over the following decade, the food gained wider appeal, going from hippie hype to Costco convenient practically overnight. “Quinoa was in the eye of the storm,” says Bolivian-born Sergio Núñez del Arco, founder of Andean Naturals, the U.S.’s largest quinoa importer, explaining that the product fit almost every recent health craze: whole grain, gluten-free, fair trade, organic.

Read the whole story

K’s Kitchen: Hummus from a pizza guy

By Kathryn Reed

Pigeonholing people is never a good idea – especially chefs. Just because someone works in a pizza place doesn’t mean pies are the only things he knows how to make.



Marc Vaccaro is a bit of a world traveler who likes to cook foods from where he has traveled. Some of these tastes have resulted in pizzas, like Thai Red Curry Chicken pizza and Classic Margarita pizza.

But he has also created a hummus that is inspired from traveling abroad. The recipe below arrived in my inbox without solicitation. I also have not tried it. But it sounds so good that I wanted to share it before I got around to making it – just in case that takes a while.

Then again, maybe I’ll just go to one of his restaurants to try it. It’s on the menu at Rubicon.

Vaccaro has worked as head chef for Rubicon Pizza Co. at Northstar, Fireside Pizza Co. at Squaw Valley, and will have the same title when Base Camp Pizza Co. opens in Heavenly Village.

Hummus, Feta, and Olives

Hummus

3 C chickpeas (precooked)

¾ C light olive oil

¾ T garlic, minced

¼ C lemon juice

½ tsp cumin, powder

¾ tsp paprika, sweet

½ tsp kosher Salt

Place all ingredients into a food processor and puree until smooth. Some chickpeas will contain more moisture than others therefore, if necessary feel free to add a touch more oil or a bit of water to achieve the consistency you are looking for.

Store in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Marinated Kalamata Olives

3 C Kalamata olives in brine

½ bunch oregano, fresh

½ T red chili flakes

1 T garlic, minced

1 C extra virgin olive oil

Remove olives from brine and place in a large mixing bowl.

Strip the leaves from the fresh oregano and add to the bowl, along with half teaspoon of crushed red chili flakes and 1 tablespoon of minced garlic.

Add a cup of olive oil and give the ingredients a quick mix.

Pour into a container and store in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Pita Herb Blend

2 T oregano, dry

2 T thyme, dry

½ tsp kosher salt

½ C olive oil

Place all ingredients together in a small bowl and mix well to evenly distribute the ingredients throughout. Be sure to remix the herb blend prior to using as the salt has a tendency to settle on the bottom.

Turn oven temperature to 450 degrees.

While oven is preheating, take the time to assemble your ingredients. If using a feta cheese that comes in a large brick or submerged in a brine, remove from brine and cut into ½ inch cubes and assemble on one side of your serving dish. Take the freshly made hummus and place alongside the Feta, followed by the marinated olives.

When oven is hot, mix the pita herb blend with a spoon, and using a pastry brush apply a thin layer to one side of the pita and place in the oven to cook for roughly 5 minutes or until very lightly brown and slightly crisp. Cut pita into bite sized chips and serve alongside your already made dish of Hummus, Feta, and Olives.

Walking, eating, history combined into one event

A progressive dinner along Ski Run Boulevard in South Lake Tahoe will combine local storytellers with local cuisine.

The April 28 event is a collaboration of Lake Tahoe Leadership and Lake Tahoe Historical Society to raise funds for the Friends of the El Dorado County Library. Dinner guests will start at Black Bear Inn for hors d’ oeuvres, stroll to Nepheles for a salad course, then to Blue Angel Café Loft for the entrée and finally shuttle or walk – depending on weather – to the Riva Grill for dessert.

Although the public library normally hosts children’s storytelling, this event is adults-only and dinner guests should be prepared for possibly bawdy tales and bring their drinking and walking shoes.

Tickets are $65. The first seating will begin at 5:30pm at the Black Bear Inn and is expected to wind up at the Riva Grill in time for sunset at 7:45pm. A parking shuttle will depart Ski Run Marina 10 minutes before each seating.

For bookings and more information, call (415) 992.2433 or email supperstroll@gmail.com.