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Chile Outgrows Food Traditions

Ruth Marie Gaessler and Carlos Krassa describe Chile's need for improved nutrition education

Chile is a land of contrasts. Blazing deserts and dank antarctic forests; the longest coastline in the world and some of the highest mountain peaks; modern industrial cities and primitive agricultural communities; land which looked too poor to tempt the conquistadores yet which contains some of the richest mineral deposits in the world; seemingly isolated geographically, but leading the hemisphere in social legislation. These are some of her many contrasts and paradoxes.

These contrasts seem to form the problems of Chile. Her problems are not unique, but it has been only recently that this long sliver of land on the southwest shore of South America has made an effort to find suitable solutions. It is not easy for a country which has observed the same customs for a long period of time to accept new ideas. This seems to be the case with nutrition, which is one of her major problems.

Chile grows a large variety of foodstuffs besides the spices for which she is known. Monopolies have succeeded in obtaining control of several of the food markets. Thus prices have been so high that few people could afford the food they needed most. As a result, much of the food has been used for export purposes.

The people consume a very small variety of foodstuffs, largely starch products. This diet has become so ingrained in their lives over the years that changing is a major undertaking and requires slow and careful education. The problems which confront the nutritional experts are low income, high food costs, lack of education and a reluctance to accept new ideas.

The Chilean diet is composed mainly of various forms of sugar and starch. Their liking for sugar manifests itself in the form of rich pastries with sweet frosting. These sweets are eaten all during the day for every occasion. They have a habit of drinking a little bit of tea with their sugar. It is not unusual for them to fill their cups from one-fourth to one-third full of sugar and dilute this with tea. The sugar used is somewhat sweeter than the American variety and not as highly refined. There is also a great demand for brown sugar, probably because it is not quite as expensive. Molasses is used to a great extent over pancakes and similar foods.

The Chileans are great bread eaters, consuming anywhere from one-fourth to one-half loaf of bread per person per meal. The French type of loaf and the small individual loaves are most popular. Similar to our white bread, theirs is also highly refined but is not enriched so is practically devoid of the nutritional value of the whole wheat variety. A special type of Chilean bread which is baked by the farmers in earthen ovens and which contains no leavening is used in the rural areas. Chile produces large amount of wheat, so most of that consumed is home grown.

Legumes, potatoes and rice play an important part in the daily diet. Not a day goes by in which at least two if not all three appear once or twice in the average menu. The rice is merely cooked and eaten either plain or with sugar and milk, if the latter is available. Beans are generally boiled or baked with some type of sauce. The potatoes may be boiled, fried with salt or made into soup. A popular Chilean soup, "Cazuela," is made of potatoes cooked in water with bones containing a small amount of meat and large slices of onions. This produces a delicious but greasy product.

Obviously their main nutrition problem lies in the low consumption of protective foods, milk, meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables. All dairy products are expensive and hard to obtain. This is especially true in the cities. In the south, where the pasture lands are good, some dairy products are produced. But due to the lack of good transportation there is much waste.

Since a great deal of the land is still under the landlord system, the farmers themselves are not in a position to consume the products they produce. They are required to return most of it to the landlord, who, in return, gives them a small plot of land to cultivate for themselves and a shack in which to live. Machinery is scarce; they have no implements for separation, pasteurization or butter making. The animals easily contract illnesses because the farmers do not have the means or the knowledge to provide the extra nutrition needed in scientific feeding.

Most Chileans have a great dislike for milk, consequently much water, beer, red wine, coffee and tea are consumed. Red wine is the beverage which is used with meals and even small children drink a diluted form. Butter is rare and expensive. Olive oil is the only oil used, and fats are obtained from the animals butchered. Eggs are expensive because the chicken industry is also controlled on a monopolistic basis and the distributors are able to keep the price above the reach of the ordinary person.

Today nutrition problems in Chile are in the hands of nutrition specialists, public health services and educational institutions. The Extension Service of the Public Health Department, which is made up of 99 percent Chileans, is doing an excellent job in home demonstration work and in new nutritional educational programs which are clear and simple with practical ideas expressed in every day language. Tuberculosis hospitals are being established and children are receiving balanced meals in the schools.

Chile is making strides toward better nutrition education. This will not solve the whole problem, for the economics of the country aggravates the situation through low incomes, poor transportation facilities and lack of modern machinery. This will have to be revised before a satisfactory solution is accomplished.