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Efficient Food for the Future, In Theory

It’s 2059, the world population is on the brink of ten billion. Cities have sprawled to unfathomable sizes. From space, the planet looks like an over-lit Christmas tree at night. Arable land is at an all-time low, the farming industry has collapsed years prior. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are concepts only our grandchildren hear about in old television shows, books, and cultural history classes. Everyone’s sipping a beige-colored, bland, nutrient-rich substance from blender bottles. Employment is at an all-time high, the average work day starts at ten in the morning and ends at four at night. There is no more malnourishment.

A future with liquid sustenance made from plant-based nutrients: soy, macromolecules, vitamins, and minerals—all of your calories and nutrition in one solution. A substance that is extremely cost-effective to produce, does not require the massive and obtrusive amounts of land that farms deliver, and gives people the opportunity to continue their day without the hassle of figuring out the logistics of breaking for a meal. This is investigated thoroughly in a 2014 *The New Yorker* article by Lizzie Widdicombe who follows Soylent founder Rob Rhinehart throughout his life in the birth of his upcoming company. He explains why he believes this product is going to change the way we define food, and how it benefits both society and the planet. There is a plethora of reasons as to why Soylent may be the next *big thing*, however, the culture of food and society—being as strong and diverse as it is—would need to adapt heavily for it. The tradeoffs between utility of food, nourishment, satiation, energy, and the experience associated with it; family time, socialization, culture, and tradition—all aspects that would require cultural reworking and adjustment.

As a young post-graduate engineering student from Georgia Tech, Rhinehart felt the weight of typical adult life setting in while living in a small, overpriced apartment in San Francisco. Such is seen in his opinion of food, where he exclaims: “Food was such a large burden. It was also the time and hassle” (1). Rhinehart believed food to be an engineering problem. He wanted to figure out a way to combine all the nutrients one needed in their daily intake and remove the expensive overhead of grocery shopping and finding time to cook and prepare meals. With those time-consuming tasks out of the way, one would be able to streamline their daily activities. You would have more time for finishing a business report that needs to be done for the presentation later in the day, cramming for the next wave of final exams, or simply catching up on errands and not wanting to stop to grab food on the way.

The main advantages to Soylent are twofold: health and efficiency. In one 40-ounce bottle of Soylent, there is a fifth of all the macromolecules, vitamins, and minerals a person needs—and often does not consume with their regular diet. Four hundred calories of a thick, low-profile flavor drink that can be customized in any taste with additions of confectionary or spices such as cocoa powder, cinnamon, or vanilla extract. The versatility is endless. In terms of efficiency, I can relate to the fact of sitting at my desk and being fully entranced (in the “zone”) with assignments. I have a great bout of momentum going in my work with minimal distractions or obligations. Then, a hunger pang sets in. Do I, a college student, interrupt my groove of assignment work to venture to the cafeteria, wait in lines to receive my meal, spend time eating my meal, clean up and walk back to my dorm? Just to sit back down and continue with my work, my momentum has come to a standstill and I feel sluggish with the digestion processes taking place after a complex meal. On the other hand, I could reach below my desk and grab a bottle of Soylent. An entire meal in a bottle, which I could consume while processing the assignments at hand. This would save me about an hour of my time and keep my momentum and motivation going full-force, alleviating the issue of hunger and avoiding the sluggish post-lunchtime crash of a large meal. In the article, Rhinehart introduces Widdicombe to some college students from Caltech who have seriously implemented Soylent into their lives. “Nearby, about ten students sat around a table surrounded by laptops and problem sets, ignoring the dinnertime commotion: Soylent drinkers. Several of them clutched water bottles filled with beige goo” (15). Rather than joining the dinner rush, these college students maintain their activities of studying and assignment work for maximum efficiency. Imagine this applied to the average work day for an adult, perhaps in a cubicle, or a medical professional who is pressed for time so far as to wondering when their next bathroom break could be. With the removal of punctuated mealtimes throughout our days, there is a possibility of a reduced work day with having the same amount of productivity.

Everything about Soylent sounds great on paper and in theory. The health aspects, the efficiency of it all. It’s truly a futuristic idea which can easily be applied any lifestyle. I believed the same for myself as I purchased Soylent shortly after reading Lizzie Widdicombe’s article. I’m a college student who has class for a majority of my waking hours, work at a laboratory when not in class, and strive to complete all my assignments to supplement my studies. Time is precious for me, therefore I jumped on the idea. The efficiency has saved me plenty of time and hassle of trying to balance my peer’s schedules to meet for a set dinner time, alongside giving me the peace of mind that *yes, I can, and I will finish my work before midnight*. I felt energetic and satiated from the meal replacement but received adverse reactions from anyone who witnessed my consumption of such. I even had a hard time enjoying the process of drinking my dinner. The flavor is bland—mediocre at best—and never seemed to satisfy my cravings for actual food which inevitably left me searching for snacks. I can now say it’s definitely a wonderful theory, but that’s just about it.

In my essay *Pesto Alfredo Tortellini*, I talk about my favorite meal and how it has deeply engraved itself into my life and character. Coming home to the smell of alfredo in the air, the comforting and warm feeling of carbohydrate-rich pasta and sitting with my parents after a long day of *life*.

“One could not begin to describe the feelings I have for this dish, amongst many other dishes of my mother’s creation. It’s the nostalgia; coming home being hit by a wall of irrepressible and complex fragrances that stay constant and never change throughout my childhood” (2).

The fond memories behind such a favorite meal transcend whatever could possibly be replaced by a liquid substitute. With Soylent, the efficiency—and monotony—of such would thus end the enjoyment of a meal and the whole dynamic behind it if implemented as a normal way of life. Food is a way of life. It’s unapologetically cultural, with roots tied as far as human history can show. Different societies and cultures fare with different recipes, traditions of cooking, varying ingredients, and ways of dining and consuming dishes. Some recipes are homemade and passed down through many generations, where as some are public and known to represent a certain culture, like sushi is for Japan, the cheeseburger for the United States, tikka masala for India, and so on. These different dishes give humans character through a cultural sense, and in global sense keep us connected.

While Soylent is a great idea for the planet, adjusting the farming industry from stripping the ever-diminishing arable lands to dirt, and a sound idea in efficiency, it’s not a benefit in terms of society and culture that is shaped and molded by food itself. Soylent is an alternative meal source in which people who are busy can reach for in an instant for their caloric intake, rather than wasting their precious time otherwise. However, for the restaurant industry, the diverse palates of people all around the world, and the traditions of meals everywhere, the complete implementation and transition to Soylent would be detrimental.

Rhinehart explains that Soylent isn’t supposed to replace every meal you consume. “…we’ll see a separation between our meals for utility and function, and our meals for experience and socialization” (3). The division between the two, according to Rhinehart, is that Soylent is a go-to meal—a utility—whereas eating otherwise is meant to be for experience. Spending time with people to break for a meal is an enjoyment encountered by many. Sitting down at the dinner table and enjoying a homecooked meal is a quintessential aspect to human life. Sometimes it is worth your while to enjoy the punctuations in your day to grab a bite to eat because time is precious, and food can be an experience.

Works Cited

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