

## *New Food Pyramid Needs More Structure, Say Steinhardt Nutrition and Food Studies Faculty*

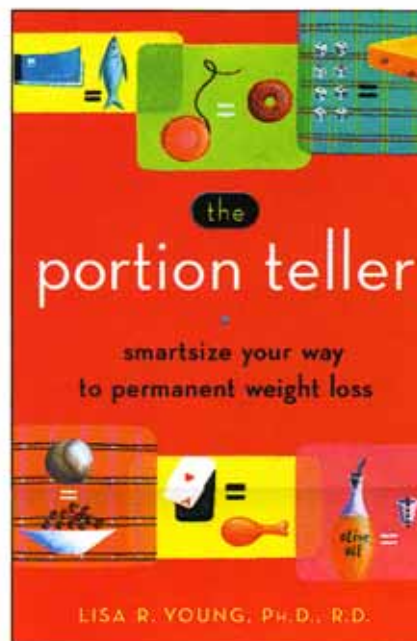
By Jennifer Zwiebel

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Guide Pyramid has been offered as an educational tool guiding children and adults to make the best healthy choices in food and nutrition since 1992. But not many followed its recommendations.

"They never did anything to educate the public about what it meant or how to use it," says **Marion Nestle**, Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health in the Steinhardt School, and author of *Food Politics*, a book that looks at nutrition and the food industry.

Due to the nation's growing obesity epidemic, the USDA decided it was time to improve the model and reach out to the public. It spent \$2.5 million on a public relations firm to develop a new design. The latest food pyramid, unveiled by the USDA in late April, personalizes dietary advice through something the USDA calls "MyPyramid." This takes care of the education component by offering consumers the ability to customize the categories online at [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov), according to age, sex, and activity level. MyPyramid now includes vertical color-coded bars representing food groups, strongly emphasizing exercise as just as important — or sometimes more — than food.

"It is a pyramid without food," says **Lisa Young**, adjunct professor in Steinhardt's Department of Nutrition, Food



Studies, and Public Health, and author of the forthcoming book, *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*, due out on May 31. "There is more of a focus on exercise. As for the serving-size component, it is impossible to understand the serving sizes, unless you cook regularly and eat at home. And, even then, it is difficult. What they should be doing is giving us real examples of what an ounce or cup look like, in visual form."

Young's new book teaches consumers how to relate typical marketplace portions to standard serving sizes. For example, a bowl of pasta in a restaurant, a typical muffin, or a typical bagel translates into 5-6 grain servings, which is almost all your grains for the entire day. Many steaks contain more than a full day's worth of meats, she says, which is not addressed in the pyramid.

Another problem Young has with the current food pyramid is that the colors are confusing. "Purple is meat? To me, purple would be grapes or wine, representing antioxidants. And how does orange correlate to grains? I would think that would be beta-carotene, like oranges or carrots. I don't understand why they can't make it more user-friendly."

**Beth Dixon**, assistant professor in Steinhardt's Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health and co-editor with Nestle of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Food and Nutrition*, feels having a food guidance system for understanding nutrition is important but understanding this system will be challenging.

"Nutrition is very complex, and time will tell to what degree the revised pyramid is successful," says Dixon. "In addition to nutrition education materials, there's no doubt that we need large scale changes in our environment to truly improve the health of our population and prevent obesity, especially in children."

Nestle says that computer-savvy people will enjoy using the Web site to get their own dietary prescriptions. Her recommended prescription, she says, means that she is supposed to eat 6 ounces of grains (half whole), 2 and 1/2 cups of vegetables, 1 and 1/2 cups of fruit, 3 cups of milk, and 5 ounces of meat and beans every day.

"If I do this," she says, "I then get 195 calories to spend any way I want. This is a prescription to eat junk food, and is not a good idea."