Since moving his Food and Brand Lab to Cornell in 2005, Brian Wansink is on what he calls “a mindless-eating mission.” With two-thirds of Americans either obese or overweight, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, Wansink is crusading against America’s growing girth. In the process, he has gained considerable influence over what foods and how much of them appear on our plates.
Wansink, the John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing in the Department of Applied Economics and Management, reconfigures home kitchens, school lunchrooms, and corporate cafeterias to nudge people away from traps that set off overindulgence. He has overhauled the USDA Food Guide Pyramid and propelled its web site to the top-viewed page in the federal government domain, surpassing even the IRS. And his hugely popular book, Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think, an account of the lab’s dozens of studies of the environmental factors that prompt us to unknowingly overeat, is available in 19 languages.

In 2009, however, Wansink is pursuing perhaps his most ambitious goal yet: convincing the residents of a small city in the Midwest to add a collective 10,000 years to their lives by adopting healthier dining habits. Wansink is the food expert for the Vitality Project, a six-month, community-wide initiative to remake Albert Lea, a town of 18,000 tucked between two lakes in southern Minnesota, into one of the world’s healthiest communities.

Dan Buettner, a National Geographic explorer who has ventured to the globe’s far-flung “blue zones”—his term for areas where residents enjoy an exceptionally long lifespan—leads the project. Buettner and a group of researchers hope to weave common traits from places like Okinawa, Japan, and Loma Linda, Calif, where residents often live beyond 100 years, into the fabric of Albert Lea.

For his part, Wansink focuses on persuading the town’s residents and restaurants, schools, and employers to adopt his mindless-eating solutions. He has developed a list of small, voluntary measures people and restaurants can implement to shift away from unhealthy eating tendencies.

“When I constructed my dream team for the Vitality Project, Brian’s name was first on the list,” says Buettner, who sought out Wansink after reading his hit book. “Brian is a high-octane personality with an incandescent and brilliant mind. Yet he has none of the pretense that people of his stature normally have, which opens him up to discourse and connections with people in the Albert Lea community.”

For Wansink, the project is perfect for putting his wellness ideals into practice and to further examine food psychology. It also carries an added perk: Albert Lea is a short drive to his Iowa hometown, a place that would shape his food habits for years to come.

“Food Is What We Do”

Ask Wansink about his experiences as a boy growing up in Sioux City, Iowa, in the 1960s, and the conversation turns to food. He remembers a “somewhat imagined” bout of “perceived food insecurity” when his dad was laid off and his family meals often included powdered milk, pancakes,
Dan Buettner itself in campus dining halls and local bars to observe people in everyday settings. Each year, the Food and Brand Lab conducts as many as 20 studies. "Our mission in the lab is to observe eating behavior as it occurs in the real world and come up with ways for people to avoid common food traps," says Wansink. "Everyone is affected by powerful environmental factors that can trigger overeating without even being aware."

Wansink’s lab attracts plenty of under and "weird chicken parts." He spent summers on his aunt and uncle’s farm shucking corn and knocking on doors to peddle fresh produce. Later, he took a job delivering pizzas where the biggest perk was unlimited slices for the drivers. "I put on a few pounds then," he admits.

"Living in Iowa, food is at the center of everything," Wansink says. "You live on a farm or work on one, or you have friends who do. Food is what we do."

It’s little wonder that Wansink gravitated toward a career in food and nutrition. After earning his master’s degree in communication from Drake University in 1984, he considered a career as a food writer. But a consulting project at Better Homes and Gardens turned him onto consumer behavior, and soon after he started a Ph.D. program at Stanford University intent on “getting people to eat more vegetables.”

At Stanford, Wansink’s inchoate research interests started to take shape, and his dissertation on food selection won top honors from the national Marketing Science Institute. In the following years, he held academic posts at Dartmouth and UPenn’s Wharton School before joining the University of Illinois in 1997, where he first established his Food and Brand Lab.

Wansink produced a stream of studies advancing his theory that subtle visual cues, not appetite or food quality, are a dieter’s bogeyman. Consider his bottomless soup bowl experiment, which won a 2007 Ig Nobel Award “for research that makes people laugh and then think.” Wansink and an engineering student rigged up a soup bowl with a hidden tube that imperceptibly refills the bowl as a person slurps. Predictably, diners treated to an endless supply of soup ate 73 percent more than their single-bowl companions, but, remarkably, the overeaters rated themselves no more sated by the meal. One participant even downed a quart of soup in 15 minutes before Wansink stopped the experiment.

At Cornell, Wansink continues his headline-grabbing studies. Lately, he showed that the iconic Joy of Cooking’s modern recipes pack 63 percent more average calories per serving than the 1936 edition.

Before launching a large-scale study, Wansink and student researchers often perform a trial run in the Food and Brand Lab in Warren Hall. Equipped with two-way mirrors and hidden cameras and scales, in a few hours the space can be outfitted to simulate a dining room, living room, or home kitchen—the perfect vantage point to measure how people perceive and consume their food. To get more data, the team will plant itself in campus dining halls and local bars and restaurants to observe people in everyday settings. Each year, the Food and Brand Lab conducts as many as 20 studies.

“Our mission in the lab is to observe eating behavior as it occurs in the real world and come up with ways for people to avoid common food traps,” says Wansink. “Everyone is affected by powerful environmental factors that can trigger overeating without even being aware.”

Wansink’s lab attracts plenty of undergraduates from nutrition, applied economics, psychology, and pre-med, but they also come from unexpected majors like government, library science, chemical engineering, and mathematics. He screens the 40 applicants down to no more than 15 finalists, who work for a year in the lab. Each year, the lab follows a broad theme. For the current year, it’s Smarter School Lunchrooms; next year’s will be Alcohol Consumption.

“The opportunity for hands-on learning is what makes a Cornell degree so powerful,” says Wansink. “You can get a great education by going to classes, but you get an exceptional, life-changing education when you work with research and with community extension. No place can do this in the same way Cornell can. Our extension program is beyond legendary.”

Non-Fat Albert

Connecting with the public is what most attracted Wansink to the Vitality Project in Albert Lea. There, he has pitched his mindless-eating solutions to townspeople and community and business leaders.

Atop Wansink’s list of recommendations for families and individuals is a home audit that gauges whether the layout of their kitchens and dining rooms prods them to pig out. Junk food stored in plain sight and eating from oversized plates cause people to gorge. A fridge that gives fruits and veggies center stage and a dining room far removed from a TV lead to more moderate meals and snacking.

Wansink meets with Mary Nelson, food service director for Albert Lea schools, to discuss how to remake students’ eating habits.
Shorna Broussard Allred

to gorge, his research shows. On the other hand, a fridge that gives fruits and veggies center stage and a dining room far
removed from a TV lead to more moderate meals and snacking.

"People don’t realize how much we are at the mercy of our environment," W ansink says. "We buy in bulk and have
these huge pantries stocked with everything imaginable. When hunger sets in, we turn to whatever’s most convenient."

The town’s restaurants are getting in on the act, too. More than 60 percent of Albert Lea eateries have adopted some of
W ansink’s “win-win solutions,” such as highlighting their most profitable healthy items on their menus instead of the bacon
cheeseburger or offering half-sized entrees.

W ansink says such a community-wide approach is another way to help Americans slim down. If the experiment
succeeds, Vitality Project organizers are keen to hold up Albert Lea, a city with typical rates of obesity, hypertension, and dia-
teses, as a model for the rest of the nation. “We’re hoping that the practices we put in place here will transform this community
and ultimately scale to other parts of the country,” Buettner says.

In Albert Lea, the project appears to be working. One local truck stop implement-
ed 10 of W ansink’s 12 suggestions and now touts half-sized portions and fresh salads
alongside its traditional greasy fare. “This is a place that most people would consider
the unhealthiest in the world,” he says. “If they can do it, anything’s possible.”

Consumer Camp is an annual event hosted by Cornell’s Food and Brand Lab. Here, partici-
pants learn how people serve less (and eat less) when the color of the food contrasts with
the plate and serve more when the colors match.

W ansink demonstrates how the "bottomless soup bowl" works.

Ted Boscia

Building the Pyramid

The media and book reviewers have christened W ansink with many color-
ful monikers, the “Wizard of Why,” the “Sherlock Holmes of Food,” and the
“Nutrition Swami” among them. For the final year and a half of President George
W . Bush’s second term, he could claim another: “Food Czar.”

On Nov. 19, 2007, W ansink became exec-
utive director of the USDA’s Center for
Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), a position with great authority to set the
nation’s food agenda. In his limited time in
Washington, W ansink targeted nutritional
gatekeepers—individuals (usually women)
responsible for purchasing and preparing
a family’s meals—with his makeover
of the Food Guide Pyramid. By focusing
increased its web hits to 5.6 million per day,
becoming the most accessed.gov web site
in the federal domain.

“For years, the food pyramid was this
convoluted concept that few people un-
derstood or used,” says W ansink, whose
research is credited with developing the
popular 100-calorie snack packs. “Guided
by my research from the Food and Brand
Lab, I felt it was best to target the nutri-
tional gatekeepers and orient the pyramid
around menu planners and other easy-to-
use features. Instead of targeting everyone,you capture one person who shapes the
eating habits for the entire family.”

W ansink also oversaw the develop-
ment of the 2010 federal dietary guide-
lines, a review that occurs every five years
between the USDA and the Department of
Health and Human Services. His work at
the USDA led ABC World News to name
him its “Person of the Week” in January
2008.

“Serving at the USDA helped me become
more sophisticated with my research,” he
says. “You quickly gain a sense of what’s
possible when it comes to practice, policy,
and daily life. In academia, we sometimes
come up with great, incredibly nuanced
ideas that just wouldn’t go very far in the
real world. That’s the wonderful challenge.”

—Ted Boscia