



**Wellness Mama Podcast Episode 22**  
**What is Really in Your Food?**  
**Interview with Vani Hari, the Food Babe**

**Show Notes:** <http://wellnessmama.com/podcast/food-babe-whats-in-your-food/>

In this episode of the Wellness Mama Podcast, Vani Hari, the Food Babe, and I talk about what is really in your food that you might have no idea you are consuming.

Vani and her website [FoodBabe.com](http://FoodBabe.com) have become incredibly popular for her work in exposing the dirty secrets of the food industry, especially chemicals that are added to foods in the United States but banned in other countries.

She has successfully launched petitions against many food giants and has gotten them to remove artificial dyes, colors, chemicals and even antibiotics from their foods.

Vani shares her own story and health journey from being an over-stressed and over-worked corporate employee with a poor diet to being a crusader for real food.

Her transformation began with an appendicitis attack and a resulting investigation into the foods she had been eating that led to her poor health. Vani's research revealed many problems in our current food supply and she set out to expose these problems and educate the world so that consumers could make informed choices.

Listen to the whole interview and find out what foods you may be eating that contain ingredients you would never knowingly consume!

This interview is a replay from the Wellness Family Summit, a seven day event that brought together experts in health and wellness who shared the common goal of working to create a healthier future for our children.

Who else would you like for me to interview? What topics would you like to hear covered? Please let me know in the comments below!

Thanks as always for listening and have a healthy week!

**Transcript:**

**Katie:** Hi. Welcome back to the Wellness Family Summit. I could not be more excited about today's guest. She is a personal friend and an incredibly inspiring human being. Vani Hari writes at the wildly popular blog, Foodbabe.com. She has been on every major news outlet and has successfully petitioned major companies to change the ingredients in their products, with the help of her massive Food Babe army.

What's even more amazing is that this all started as a personal journey for her, and then now she's this amazing activist to help so many other people. So Vani, thank you so much for being here, and welcome.

**Vani:** Hey, Katie. It's great to be here. Thank you so much for having me as part of this summit. It's amazing.

**Katie:** Awesome. So most people know that you are widely known as the Food Babe, and you're doing some amazing things in spreading awareness of food ingredients. But can we start at the beginning? Have you always been interested in health and real foods? Or was there a pivotal moment in your life that started this journey for you?

**Vani:** Well, I was actually more interested in candy and fast food for the majority of my life, to tell you the truth. This healthy lifestyle has been minority in my lifetime, if you can believe it or not. I grew up as a typical American child, but I had two immigrant parents that didn't know how to cook American food. So they relied heavily on processed packaged foods, fast foods,

and really wanted me and my brother to really fit in with everyone else around us in Charlotte, North Carolina where I grew up and where I live now.

So they basically allowed us to eat whatever we wanted. As a result, I had so many issues as a child. I had eczema, asthma, allergies, always had stomach aches, never felt well, never felt like I had a lot of energy, didn't ever really feel like I could really concentrate in school, and didn't really understand that food was actually affecting my body negatively until I started to change my diet after a health scare in my early 20s, where I was working for a big six consulting firm and working that rat-race lifestyle and eating what everybody else around me was eating and trying to continue to be successful and keeping up with all of my coworkers and getting into work before my boss got there and leaving after my boss left and trying to live in this very fast paced culture.

My health habits and everything just kind of went by the wayside. So not only did I experience all these issues as I had as a child, but I started to experience more issues, which included weight gain and other stress-related issues. So when I had that health scare, when I had my appendix taken out, it was really . . . I call it a health scare. Appendicitis is like . . . A lot of people think it's a really normal thing. It can happen to anybody. It's a really minimal surgery, but you're getting an organ taken out of your body.

For being in my early 20s, having all these health issues, being on several prescription drugs, and then having that happen to me, it was that breaking

point that I said to myself, "This is a life that I no longer want to live. I don't want to feel this way. I don't want to look this way." So I started to investigate what I'd been doing with my body and investigate what I'd been eating.

I started to channel all this energy that I learned in high school when I was the top-tiered rank debater. Every year, you get a topic. One year's topic was health care. Every summer, we would go away to debate camp where we would learn how to research. Back then, we didn't have Google. So we actually had to learn how to pick up the books on the bookshelf, photocopy them for evidence that you could find different points to affirm your resolution for that year or go against it. You learned how to debate both sides, and you had to look for sources of material and experts that believed a certain way, so that you could debate and convince the judge in order to vote for you, that you had the better argument.

So I started to channel all this energy that I learned back then. At the time, when I was studying the healthcare system, I realized it was screwed up, but I was using it to win debate rounds with that information. I wasn't really using it to my health. So when I had that health scare, I started to use this information for my health, and it started to change dramatically when I found out what was happening to our food supply, how it had been adulterated by not only genetically engineered ingredients, but also food additives that were approved for use in a very small amount but now have been added to so many different foods and many of the foods that I had been consuming. The

majority of the food that I was consuming was processed either from one or two crops, American crops, corn or soy.

It just made a lot of common sense to me that you really can't get healthy, you really can't get all the nutrition that your body needs, by eating one or two crops. So I started to look elsewhere for my nutrition and started to pick up green, leafy vegetables and some of the foods that have the highest nutrient content. When I started eating those foods, my body started dramatically changing, and I started to shun all the foods that I had been eating for most of my life, which include the fast food, the Subway, the Chick-Fil-A.

At the time, I didn't really understand why I didn't have that taste for processed food anymore, but I quickly started to realize why that food tasted so different than real food when I started to learn about the food chemicals the food industry has been putting into food to either preserve it or make it taste a certain way or to cover up the fact that they're using food-like substances as food to make it taste like food or to make you crave it more than you should.

So I started to learn about all these food industry tricks and started to teach myself, reading every book under the sun that I could get my hands on, and talking to experts, talking to scientists, talking to the consumer groups, the non-profit organizations who are looking out for consumer health, talking to

their lead scientists and their top organizational staff, the presidents of those companies, to find out more information, so that I could use it for my health.

So I started to build this knowledge base, just me being passionate for my own health. I didn't ever expect to use this information to teach the world about what's really happening in food. Really Foodbabe.com was born out of a request of friends and family who begged me to really share this information with them, especially my recipes and what I was eating on a daily basis, so that they could follow this lifestyle too because they saw the 180 change in my health.

They saw that I went from someone really sick and unhealthy that didn't look that great, to someone now full of energy and off of prescription drugs and a maintenance of weight. I started to feel more beautiful, look better, and get rid of some of those ailments and completely transform my life. So they wanted to know the secrets.

So I started Foodbabe.com in April of 2011. At first, I wanted to call it Eathealthyliveforever.com. You've heard this story before, Katie, but I really wanted to call it Eathealthyliveforever.com because I really believed that, like if you eat healthy, you'll live forever, .com. Maybe not the longest life, but you'll actually start to live your life.

I said over to my husband, who's the tech geek in the family, "Hey, can you register this name, this domain, Eathealthyliveforever.com?' He said, "That's a

horrible name. No one is going to remember it." He came up with the name Food Babe. At first, I was really shy about using that name for the blog. I was still working in the corporate America. I wasn't ready to call myself the Food Babe, but all my friends and my family who had requested the blog loved the name, thought it was cute. It was short, easy to remember.

So I started blogging under the pen name, Food Babe, as a way to kind of hide my identity because I was still working for these C-level executives at these big organizations, big companies. I was really nervous about sharing such a big part of my life openly on the web. I wasn't on social media or anything before starting Food Babe. So it took a lot of courage for me to break through those ideals and start this blog.

So when I started blogging, I swear I had like my mom and three or four friends following me and a couple coworkers, and that was it. You know? It wasn't until I really began to realize that there are so many people hungry for this information out there, that this information about true health, how to really take care of yourself, how to have preventative measures and preventative medicine and to really use food as medicine, hasn't been popularized through the mainstream media, wasn't available in the commercials that you see on TV, wasn't available in the mainstream magazines and literature. This information needed to be shared in a big way.

People were really being duped by a lot of the marketing messages and industry literature that's been co-opted by the food industry. I mean, even registered dieticians, some of them, are funded by some of these big food companies, their conferences, et cetera. I started to find out this information, and it really started to make me upset.

When I found out that certain individuals and health professionals and experts started recommending products that had nothing to do with health, I realized right then and there that you really have to be in control of the information that you look for. You need to do the research on your own, and you need to find out what these ingredients that you're eating mean. If you don't understand an ingredient, you need to go look it up and read it and find out what it is and where it comes from.

If you can't pronounce it, go find out what it is. Don't just ignore it and say you shouldn't eat it. Go find out what it is. That's been the basis of Foodbabe.com, is to find out what we're eating and to teach everyone about what's really in food. You'll see on the top header of Foodbabe.com, I'm hot on the trail to investigate what's in your food because that's what I'm really great at. I'm like a gum shoe. You know? I just don't stop. If somebody tells me no, I keep going.

I really want everyone to know the truth so they can make the best informed decisions for their family, and I come at it from a citizen journalist

perspective. You know? I'm not a nutritionist, a scientist. I am a citizen journalist that is looking out for the greater good and the greater people and looking beyond these special interests, so that people can get the true information about what's really in our food.

That means calling out not only the big processed fast food companies and the big processed food manufacturers, like General Mills and Kraft, et cetera, but it also means calling out organic companies, like Horizon and So Delicious, people that are using certain ingredients that they shouldn't have been. So I call out everyone. There's no one off my hit list. This is 100% for the consumer, so that they know what they're eating and drinking and can make the best informed decision for their health.

**Katie:** Yeah, I love that. I love that you walk the walk too, that it started with a personal story and that you led by example. I think those are the most powerful types of leadership and activism, when it starts from your heart like that. I'd love to get into a little bit more detail, because one thing you've talked about that is mind-boggling is how so many ingredients in the US are not found in other countries, even in the same product. So can we delve into that? What are some of the specific ingredients, especially in US food, that aren't other places? And why do you think that that divide is happening?

**Vani:** Well, several other countries, especially Europe, have what's called a precautionary principle. They actually take precaution before introducing a

food additive into the food supply if there are any questionable studies on those ingredients. They take the high road of the consumer versus the food company. Here in the United States, they do the reverse. They actually allow the food companies to say whether these food additives are safe or not, and then the FDA approves it based on what these food companies bring to the FDA.

So it's completely backwards system. That's why you'll see a slew of chemicals that are not allowed for use in other countries used here. Some of those ingredients . . . For example, one of them is one where I started a campaign to get removed, was azodicarbonamide. It was a . . . That's a mouthful of an ingredient. It's an ingredient that actually is used to create evenly dispersed air bubbles within dough and within bread and as a bleaching agent.

This is an ingredient that hasn't been allowed for use in several countries, even China. If you get caught using it in certain countries, you can get fined \$450,000 and put in prison. The reason why certain countries don't use it is because it is linked to health issues in workers, an occupational hazard, but also when it's heated, it turns into a carcinogen when it's used in food. So that's why people will actually put you in prison for using this ingredient in your food.

It's a cost saving measure that they're using this ingredient. They want their bread to look uniform, no matter how it's processed. This is what Subway was

using in their bread before I started a campaign to get it removed. Now, removing this specific ingredient from Subway doesn't make it any healthier, but what it did do was it inspired tens of companies, I'd say probably over 20 companies, to remove this company as well and bring up the awareness about how a company can say that you're eating fresh, and you're still eating this chemical that's linked to all these issues and banned across the globe and is also used in yoga mats and shoe rubber. That's not really eating fresh.

That was the really reason for my campaign for that, but it really angered me that Subway and several other companies had taken out this ingredient in all the products that they sold in other countries, but not for Americans. That disparity, that double-standard, that hypocrisy is what really angers me. It's actually the case with artificial food dyes. Artificial food dyes in Europe requires a warning label that says, "May cause adverse effects on activity and attention in children." But here in the United States, companies can get away with putting as much artificial food dye in their food as they want.

Actually there's a new study that came out that showed that the amount of food dye that's in the typical child's diet is much higher than the FDA looked at when they approved artificial food dyes several years ago. So these food dyes, these food chemicals that are allowed for use here in the United States and not elsewhere in other countries . . . I think these food companies, if

they've already reformulated their products, need to serve us the same exact product without these harmful chemicals.

They're serving us now an inferior product. I'll give you an example of Kraft mac and cheese. The main box of Kraft mac and cheese in the UK does not have artificial food dyes. It has paprika and betacarotene. Americans deserve the same. Same goes with M&Ms. M&Ms do not have artificial food dye in Europe. But here in the United States, we get these petroleum-based dyes, linked to hyperactivity in children, and that can be contaminated with carcinogens, according to the rainbow risk report from the Center of Science and Public Interest.

So this is something that is something that's widespread that companies do to save money. They won't say it when you ask them. For example, when I met with Kraft and I asked them why they do this, they wouldn't tell me, but the only reason that I could think of is that they care more about their bottom line than they care about the health of their consumers.

Personally I believe it is absolutely immoral and unethical for a company to realize their product could be harming someone or an ingredient they use in their product could be harming someone, and they continue to use it in other countries because of regulations. I think it's absolutely immoral.

**Katie:** Yeah, I agree. It makes me so mad that in Europe, food dyes contain a warning label for children, and in the US they're especially marketed to

children. Every kids' meal, every everything, is bright red or bright blue. So they are feeding our kids huge amounts of this. But when I talk about these things, one objection I get a lot is that, "Well, it's all in moderation. A little bit doesn't really count. It doesn't matter, as long as it's in moderation." So talk about that. Can a little bit of these chemicals actually impact the body? Or is it okay just to have a little bit?

**Vani:** Well, actually this is what I talk about in my new book that's coming out in February, [the Food Babe Way](#). I talk about the sickening 15 ingredients you must avoid and why it is absolutely critical that we avoid these food additives. One of the reasons is because we do not know the dose. We do not know the cumulative effect of all of these ingredients added to our food at once, the things added to our breakfast, the things added to our lunch, the things added to our snacks, to our dinner, all the things you have unintentionally added when you go out to eat or when you outsource your food to a box.

We do not know the cumulative effect of all these chemicals in our body. Actually no one has studied them, and no one knows how much we're being exposed to, even the FDA. Michael Taylor, the deputy commissioner of the FDA, said just recently in the Washington Post, "We have no idea how many chemicals the American public is being exposed to." For me, for someone who when I eliminated all of these chemicals from my diet and I went to a whole plant-based organic diet, and how my life completely changed, my looks, my medicines, going from six to eight prescription drugs, depending on the time

of season, to zero, not only my weight changing, my cravings changing, my skin changing, everything changing dramatically, I know that these chemicals aren't doing a body good.

When you look at the studies, specific studies on some of these chemicals, there are alarming things that we need to be aware of. Now, if something, for example, like carmel coloring level four, which has four MEL in it, is causing cancer, one in 100,000 people, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Do you want to be that one person in 100,000 people? I personally don't.

I've had people in my life die of cancer. I have a father who has cancer. So I know what cancer is. For an ingredient to be used for a cosmetic purpose, not for any benefit to the consumer, and have any sort of risk associated with it, I don't think it needs to be in our food. So in this book and in my work on Foodbabe.com, I try to always link back to the studies, link back to the data that I see that these ingredients could have risks associated with them. I link back to the information and the experts that are saying not to eat these ingredients. This is not me saying this. This is me finding this information out and bringing it to the public and letting them know about what's happening.

**Katie:** Yeah, I agree. You and I are both obviously big advocates of an organic diet, no processed food. But what do you think it's going to take for the pendulum to actually swing and for things to change? Because you're making

huge strides with your army in actually raising awareness and getting these ingredients out. But what can parents and families do in their own households to start bringing about these changes?

**Vani:** Well, one of the first things that people can do is start reading the ingredient lists and start investigating their food. You know? You don't have to be an expert or a scientist or nutritionist in order to read an ingredient label and to understand that ingredients that don't belong in food really shouldn't be there. What I would really like to see people do is when they find out this information, when they find out that, for example, the Fruit by the Foot or Fruit Roll-up that they've been buying for their child has cottonseed oil, which cottonseed oil is not regulated like a food crop. It's regulated like a textile crop. That means that they can spray so many different kinds of pesticides on it that aren't even allowed in food. That's actually in children's food that people are buying for their kids' lunch boxes.

When they find out information like that, and if they read it anywhere like on the blog post I just recently did on that topic, share it with someone. I mean, that's one of the most fundamental things people can do. When they learn about the ingredients in their food or they learn something about nutrition, share it with their loved ones. Teach them what they know. That's how this information starts to spread, which eventually leads to the third piece of advice, which is to vote with your dollars.

It's absolutely critical that we choose the marketplace we live in. The way we can do that is to vote with our dollars and pick the brands that are not polluting our bodies with these chemicals, that are using real whole food ingredients in their products, and start supporting those brands, the brands that want to label genetically engineered ingredients and not hide ingredients from us. We should start supporting those brands and those products, and we should start supporting the farmers markets, the people who are growing our food directly, and supporting the organic farmers, so that organic farming continues to grow and flourish.

**Katie:** Yeah, I totally agree. Obviously I think the best scenario is we all just stop eating anything that comes in a box, and we go back to that way of eating. But for those people who are maybe still . . . They have some processed food. They're working on reducing that. What are some ingredients they should be especially aware of? If they find it on a label, what should they not eat if they see these ingredients?

**Vani:** Well, one of the things that is almost in every product on the shelves out there, I feel like it's in a lot of things, is enriched flour. Enriched flour doesn't sound like a scary chemical or ingredient, but it actually is a terrible ingredient to have in food because it doesn't provide the body pretty much any nutritional value. It's so devoid of nutrition that they try to add back synthetic

vitamins into that flour to get you to eat that, to think that there is some nutrition.

So eliminating enriched flour alone would eliminate, I'd say, 50% of the products on the product shelves, just getting rid of that one ingredient, because it's just basically processed white flour. A lot of the times, it's been bleached with chemicals, which isn't good. That's one of the first ones.

The second one is to look at oils. You know? We want to stay away from the inflammatory oils. We want to stay away from the soy bean, the corn, the canola, all of those type of oils that cause inflammation. We want to move towards the olive oil, the coconut oil, and the grass-fed butter. If those products have canola, soy, or corn, likely it's probably been genetically engineered, unless it has a non-GMO project label or an organic label on the package.

So you definitely want to avoid it for that reason, but you also want to avoid it because it disrupts your omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acid ratio. That has been linked to all sorts of issues, everything from depression to Alzheimer's to autoimmune disorders, et cetera. So we want to make sure that we're putting the best oils in our body and really looking at things that aren't going to be rancid.

Then the third thing is try to avoid ingredients that don't look like food and don't sound like food. This could be something that is really easy for

consumers to understand. Because if they look at the back of a package, and they see an ingredient they don't understand, I wouldn't buy that product until you do understand that ingredient, until you do have time to look it up and find out what it is. But a lot, I'd say nine times out of 10, it's an ingredient that you probably don't want to be consuming. If it doesn't look like real food, put it back down.

I think the other really key point here . . . We hit flour. We hit oils. I think the other key point here is dairy. The concentrated amount of hormones or antibiotics available in our conventional factory farms, meat and dairy, in this country is astronomical. I really encourage everyone to either go organic and grass-fed if they can, to avoid the growth hormone that's linked to cancer and the antibiotics that is leading to antibiotic resistance, which actually threatens the whole human population if it continues the way it is, because it's producing superbugs to the point where antibiotics are not able to kill these bugs when we consume them.

So we're being exposed to these super bugs that could actually wipe out the human race. So the antibiotic issue is a huge issue. So always choose meat that hasn't been raised with antibiotics, organic meat. Make sure you look for a meat that hasn't been given growth hormone.

**Katie:** Yeah, that's so key. I think I read an article recently about how many doses of antibiotics you actually are consuming if you eat conventional meat and dairy every day. It's more than you would get if you went to the doctor regularly for getting sick. It's pretty insane, and people don't even think about it. I think it can seem really negative all the time because really, honestly, it is. There's a lot of bad stuff out there, but you also have a lot on your blog about good ways to incorporate healthy foods and vegetables and stuff like that. So that's the other side of it, obviously. Get the bad out, but talk a little bit about great ways to start incorporating the fresh, healthy, natural foods.

**Vani:** Yeah, so one of the key things that I've been able to do that I love is I try to make . . . I try to eat one raw thing at every meal. So for example, like at breakfast, I might have a bowl of oatmeal, but I also have raw blueberries on top, or I'll have a green juice with that or a green smoothie. So every meal, I'm going to have something raw. So then at lunch, I might actually have a big salad, and that can be my raw thing, but it can have some cooked components on top, cooked meat or some cooked veggie burger or some black beans or something like that.

Then at dinner, I like to either have a small salad or some carrot sticks or some other type of chopped vegetable that's also raw. That actually . . . What that allows you to do is . . . Eating something a little bit raw at each meal allows you to actually get fruits and vegetables in their most unadulterated form, that haven't been touched by anyone, that haven't been processed into a product or

into a box. So it means you're getting some serious nutrition at every single meal throughout the day. It's so little. I mean, it seems so little, but I think it really adds up in terms of getting the right nutrients in your body.

Another thing that has been absolutely amazing for my health and that I share often on my blog is super foods, things like hemp seed and chia seed and fermented foods and sprouts. These are types of foods that have an extraordinary number of nutrients compared to the density. So experiment with superfoods. Start to look for the most nutrient-dense foods on the planet and start incorporating them into your everyday diet. I have a ton of recipes using these super foods on the site. I hope you guys check it out.

**Katie:** Yeah, that's great. I always say there are so many different diet philosophies. I feel like sometimes we get hung up on these little details, but everybody pretty much agrees. Eat a ton of vegetables. So even if you have like . . . If you're not sure where to start with everything else in the diet, start there, and you've already made a big step.

Then to kind of finish up, I want to respect your time, but what would your advice be to a family who's just starting out? Maybe a mom is hearing this and is kind of feeling guilty because there are some processed things in the fridge or in the pantry, or the kids are still kind of addicted to those, like you said you were when you were little. Where would be a good starting place? Maybe three steps that they can start with to start that ball rolling.

**Vani:** So first and foremost, don't get overwhelmed. There's no reason to get overwhelmed. You can start at any point in time, and it's not an all-or-nothing thing. It took me several years to get up to this point where I know about every food chemical, and I know what to eat and what not to eat. So it is a learning process.

So the first thing to do is start to educate yourself. Pick up some books about this topic. There's a ton of books that I know you have on your site, on my site as well, where we go through, and we talk about what's happening in the food industry, that authors have detailed out specific ingredients. One of my favorite books is Pandora's Lunch Box, by Melanie Warner, where she talks about really the hot-topic chemicals in our food and what the food industry has done, and then even her own personal narrative in the back of how to break free from that.

Same with Robyn O'Brien, The Unhealthy Truth. She's done a similar thing. She provides a very balanced approach. You know? Start switching out the sprinkles on top of your child's birthday cake with non-artificial food dye sprinkles, even though sprinkles aren't actually a good thing to have. You know? Start making those small shifts. Start going for the organic chips over the processed variety. Start moving towards an ingredient list that's less amount of ingredients from the ingredients that have the most amount of ingredients. Start making those small changes.

Then the last thing here is that it's really simple. You can take it day by day. You know? You really have to plan. You can take it day by day, but you have to plan. So for example, if you know you're going to be in a situation where you're not going to have access to food, plan the day before. Take the time to think about, "Hey, can I pack a lunch tonight and put it in the fridge so I can grab and go? Can I put together a little ice pack, so that it stays fresh in my bag? Is there something I can do?"

I know I'm going to the airport on this trip. Can I take something with me to the airport, so that I'm not destined to have all of those processed foods and processed fast foods that I'm being exposed to in those environments? So it really takes a little bit of day-by-day action and day-by-day planning. So I really encourage people to care about what they're eating. Don't wait until the moment that they start to be hungry to figure out what you're going to eat. Really start to plan at the beginning of the week. Come up with a meal plan.

Actually I have a meal-planning service on my site that's called the Eating Guide. That takes the whole guesswork out for everyone and gives people the grocery shopping list and the meals that they should make each week. So they don't even have to think. Honestly it's funny. I use that as well because I'm busy. I know you're busy, Katie. When you're caught in these situations where you aren't planning and you haven't taken the time to plan, then that's really

where you start to lose control of what you're eating to outside forces, to the restaurant, to the package foods, to the fast food.

That's what we have to do, is start taking back control of our food. Start cooking. I think that's probably the third one, which is just cook as much food as possible for your family, with ingredients that you know and have picked out yourself.

**Katie:** Absolutely. Vani, thank you so, so much for your time. I know you're out there on the front lines, really raising awareness and getting people to understand what's in their food. I think you're doing amazing things. Thank you for your time and for your work.

**Vani:** Thank you so much, Katie.

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