

BOOKS & ARTS

A fresh take on food

A slew of publications examines our changing attitudes to the things we eat, so what lies behind our need for mutant maize or locally grown organic food, asks **Jascha Hoffman?**

“What’s in the fridge?” may not seem a weighty question. But food is one of our oldest and most advanced technologies. And, as two new books and a documentary film show, we all have a stake in what we eat.

Over the centuries, armies and empires have stood and fallen on the strength of their provisions. In *An Edible History of Humanity*, Tom Standage, business editor of *The Economist*, does an admirable job of showing the “invisible fork” behind the fate of nations. Attributing “social transformation ... geopolitical competition ... military conflict and economic expansion” to the cultivation of a handful of grains and meats, he explains how farming allowed bands of humans to settle and grow into societies. Early civilizations bloomed after the domestication of key plants: wheat and barley in the Near East, rice and millet in Asia, and maize and potatoes in the Americas. Later, the promise of spices lured European explorers around the globe, where they made their fortunes on transplanted crops such as sugar cane.

Standage is no cheerleader for agricultural innovation. He suggests that maize (corn), which was bred “from a simple grass into a bizarre, gigantic mutant that can no longer survive in the wild”, may have exploited us as much as we did it. The invention of farming might even have been “the worst mistake in the history of the human race” as it meant more work and a more restricted diet than was available from hunting and gathering. Yet Standage is bullish on recent efforts to master our crops, praising the pioneers of nitrate fertilizer and high-yield grains that caused a sharp spike in food production. He claims not to place blind faith in biotechnology, but believes that our best chance of meeting the global food crisis is to engineer hardier soya beans.

After growing food, we must get it to the



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table before it goes bad. In *Fresh*, Susanne Freidberg, a historian at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, chronicles how expectations about beef, fish, milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables have shifted over the past century. Freshness means more than the absence of biochemical decay. It is bound up with our notions of purity, nutrition and beauty. And these ideas have adapted to the rise of a technology that most of us now take for granted — refrigeration.

For most of human history, the only way to keep unpreserved meat from spoiling was to haul in ice from a nearby mountain range. After 1876, when the first refrigerated steamship brought tonnes of fresh beef across the Atlantic, refrigeration caught on quickly in the United States. Small-town butchers were ruined by

the chilled railcars of the early Chicago meat packers. By the 1920s, when housewives were clamouring to replace their iceboxes with Kelvinators and Frigidaires, cold food had become a mark of prestige. Consumers stopped expecting ‘fresh’ to mean just picked, caught or killed.

Coldness became a sign of freshness.

Freidberg is perceptive about how consumer attitudes responded to these mechanical advances and the marketing campaigns that surrounded them. But she gives only a small sample of the innovations that are redefining freshness today — from NatureSeal, a calcium-citrate formula that can keep a cut apple looking good for a month, to the “tamper proof, laser-coded, traceable egg” promised by a company called Eggfusion. She keeps admirably cool when discussing the global trade in baby vegetables in which some of the most perishable crops — haricots verts from Burkina Faso, mini courgettes from Guatemala, baby sweet-corn from Zambia — travel halfway around the world to market. But her culinary sense of betrayal is unmistakable when she laments that the supermarket doctrine of “permanent global summertime ... has largely destroyed the seasonality of fresh produce and with it, many would argue, its taste.”

Journalists Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, who star in a documentary by Robert Kenner titled *Food, Inc.*, broaden the attack on ‘Big Food’ on the basis of health, labour and the environment. After conceding the efficiency of the enormous slaughterhouses that churn out hundreds of thousands of identical pork chops each day, the film brings a litany of complaints against factory farming. It shows how US grain subsidies have led to the overconsumption of corn syrup and grain-fed meat; and how a ‘revolving door’ between agribusiness and the US Food and Drug Administration has led to a sharp decline in livestock inspections despite persistent bacterial scares. The film depicts how big companies can ruin small farmers by suing them for replanting their patented seeds, and tracks the growing backlash among a handful of agricultural rebels, including a rancher from North Carolina who prefers to slaughter his own grass-fed animals and a dairy tycoon who believes he can “save the world” by selling more high-end yogurt to Wal-Mart shops. If there were any doubt about the film-makers’ sympathies, the closing credits counsel viewers to buy healthy, organic and local products.

One expects a nod of agreement from Freidberg, who approves of ‘locavores’ —

An Edible History of Humanity

by Tom Standage

Walker & Company/Atlantic Books:
2009. 288 pp./368 pp. \$26/£19.99

Fresh: A Perishable History

by Susanne Freidberg

Belknap-Harvard University Press:
2009. 416 pp. \$27.95, £20.95,
€25.20

Food, Inc.

Film directed by Robert Kenner

Opened on 12 June 2009

See www.foodincmovie.com

proponents of locally sourced foods, such as Pollan and restaurateur Alice Waters (see Q&A, below) — because “less transport and storage of fresh foods saves vitamins as well as energy”. But Standage, poring over the numbers, believes that the current obsession with calculating ‘food miles’ is misguided. Transporting food may

take less energy than growing or cooking it. So the carbon footprint of an English lamb chop, raised on energy-intensive maize feed, can be larger than that of a grass-fed one imported to Britain from New Zealand. If consumers want to save energy, he suggests, they should consider leaving the lid on the pan.

Arguments over food will continue as long as humans survive to eat it. As Standage contends, “every thing that every person has ever done ... has literally been fueled by food”. That fact of history is unlikely to change. ■

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Q&A: Education from the ground up

When **Alice Waters** founded Chez Panisse restaurant in 1971, she used fresh ingredients from local suppliers and sparked a culinary revolution in Berkeley, California, that has spread worldwide. For the past decade she has been taking that revolution into education. Waters talks about teaching science in the garden, and the true cost of a school lunch.

Why did you start teaching children to grow vegetables?

A local school principal called me to see if engaging children in gardening and cooking could change the way they ate. Having worked in my restaurant for 25 years, I realized I shouldn't be alone in tapping such a pristine source of local food. At a jail in San Francisco, I had seen inmates so engaged in gardening that they did not want to leave. I knew there was something deep in the idea of putting your hands in the earth. That is what we discovered in my Edible Schoolyard programme: if kids grow it and cook it, they will want to eat it.

How do you teach science through gardening?

You can weave food into the curriculum in the most imaginative ways — the growing of it, the cooking of it, the eating of it. You can get young kids to count varieties of beans instead of buttons. When the kids go out in the garden, they measure the beds and calculate the number of seeds that have to be planted. They work on irrigation systems. They see how quickly the worms decompose the vegetables. It's science and they think it is fun. I was a teacher before I started my restaurant.

What's wrong with most school lunches?

In the United States, the schools get the least healthy foods, and there is not enough money to pay real cooks. You have a deadly combination of surplus commodities that are basically fast food and reimbursement that's so small that you cannot prepare fresh salads and fruits. The cost? An obesity epidemic, the pollution of the environment and the destruction of our culture.

Should governments tell us how to eat?

We believe that eating is our own private turf. But if other people are eating poorly,



Alice Waters takes learning outdoors with her hybrid programme of gardening and science.

it raises the rates of everyone's health care. This is a global issue that governments must regulate. We have to decide what constitutes food. In France they have national health care, so they measure and weigh children to tell them how many calories they should have for lunch. We need 'edible education' to start at an early age. The government should pay up front for that, instead of cleaning up later with health care.

Have you discussed this with the administration of Barack Obama?

It has been my goal since 1992 to encourage every US president to plant a victory garden in the spirit of President Thomas Jefferson. I met Michelle Obama last summer, and I know people in Congress are talking about linking farms and schools. Hillary Clinton is a big proponent too. I call this a stimulus package. You nourish all children with food that is good, clean

and fair. That means buying it from local sources. It is a moral issue. It cannot wait another day.

What other food-education work is going on outside of California?

We're concentrating now on New Orleans. Because it is so fertile and so in need after Hurricane Katrina we wanted to help, and in three years the programme has blossomed. It is expensive — it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to hire the best teachers and to take care of visitors. The Yale University Sustainable Food Project of the past six years is also a success. It has integrated an organic farm that grows 250 varieties of fruits and vegetables into the curriculum. Hundreds of students volunteer to work in the gardens and they are demanding fair-trade coffee and grass-fed beef all over campus. I'm going to Harvard University soon to see whether we can change that old food system too.

What about countries that are struggling to feed their children?

I've been in touch with a teacher in Ghana who said, “For our ultimate survival, we have to engage the children in the cooking of their own food.” Former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan has also talked about the green revolution in Africa. People in Africa haven't come to this from taste and beauty, as I did, but from the ideas of hunger and necessity. But we all arrive at the same place. We need to feed everybody on this planet. ■

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Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea
by Alice Waters

Chronicle Books: 2008. 80 pp. \$24.95