

# **Food World**

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Food represents human cultures like nothing else: not only because food is the most basic human need, but also because throughout history human societies have been determined by the interaction with its production and in turn used food to express themselves in ways that go far beyond what is required for mere existence. So it is no surprise that even as societies get more affluent and more secure about ensuring basic subsistence food supplies, their fascination with food in various forms does not cease. Indeed, in some ways, this fascination gets even more entrenched and convoluted, as various food cultures are used to express class and other social differences.

The explosion in the food industry across the world is a feature of globalisation that is clearly based on commercial considerations but is also rapidly generating cultural changes. The early phase of this expansion was marked by the rapid proliferation of multinational fast food chains and aggressive marketing of “new” food products to mass markets in the developing world, along with extensions of geographical sourcing of food products that drew even the most remote corners of the world into complex supply chains.

The dark side of this was described to chilling effect in Eric Schlosser’s excellent critique *Fast Food Nation* published in 2002 – but since then things have got worse rather than better in many ways. There is the obvious impact on food production, with the nature of farming and animal husbandry changing to more corporate driven patterns focussed on cost reduction and the disempowerment of small independent farmers. But the effect on consumers has been equally profound. The rapid spread of certain types of food consumption obviously fed on the power of advertising to amplify people’s preferences, but it also had dire consequences in terms of exporting a fundamentally unhealthy “all-American menu” to the rest of the world.

The huge increase in demand for food products that are often utterly lacking in nutrition (and often actually detrimental for health) reflects advertising strategies that target certain demographics (children and young people) as well as certain social aspirations and insecurities (as in China and South Africa where certain fast food products are designed to offer the lure of the North American lifestyle). This has been widely recognised to be one of the main factors contributing to the obesity epidemic in children not just in rich countries but even in developing countries.

Various relatively high-profile health scares (outbreaks of salmonella poisoning, Mad Cow disease and so on) that directly resulted from cost-cutting and profit maximising food production and distribution then caused some reaction. Even as consumers – especially the increasingly affluent consumers in developed countries and in the elites and middle classes of developing countries – have become more dependent upon the global food industry to provide their food, they show increasing distrust with respect to the environmental and safety concerns of food provision by large profit-driven corporate behaviour.

This combines with another upsurge of food in the media: the proliferation of programming and publication devoted to food in varying aspects. Books about food, cooking and chefs form one of the most important sources of profits for publishing houses. Newspapers, even financial papers, find it necessary to carry more stories about food and restaurants. Television channels, even those concerned with current affairs, devote an increasing part of their programming to food, including competitions between chefs. Blogging about food has become one of the most popular forms of online expression and interaction, with vast and growing numbers of writers and readers. Food discussions also dominate the new social media.

This combination of media interest and public concerns has generated two contradictory yet intertwining trends in the global food industry. One celebrates the homogenising tendency of global supply that allows all kinds of food items to be available in all seasons all over the world. The other emphasises local production for local use, based on seasonality and concern for health standards, creating a growing niche market for food that is organic, local or produced under verifiably safe conditions.

A visit to a “food megastore” in Bologna, Italy sparked some of these reflections. “Eataly” is a chain started by the Italian businessman Oscar Farinetti five years ago with a shop in Turin. It has expanded rapidly to various other cities in Italy, the United States and Japan and is planning further expansion into many other countries with a model that seems unstoppable. The stores are huge (the one in New York covers 4,600 square metres; the store in Rome uses up an abandoned air terminal) and are hard to classify: a combination of grocery store, food court with cafes and bistros and restaurants, cooking appliance shop, venue for continuous lecture-demonstrations by butchers and bakers and pastry chefs, bookshop.

The concept has been described as a Disney World for foodies, but the underlying purpose is supposedly more serious. The idea is to create a commercially successful public training programme for the Slow Food movement – a movement of relatively recent Italian origin that focuses on reducing the time and distance between food production and consumption by relying on more local, seasonal and fresh ingredients and reducing the dependence upon factory processing.

In just five years this particular chain has already become wildly successful, and there are similar stores and chains opening up in many places around the world, in fact everywhere that the numbers of more well-off consumers are increasing. This points to an unhappy contradiction, created by the inequality that this reflects in food consumption and its health implications.

The rich and better off in both developed and developing countries are seeking healthier forms of food consumption (and typically harking back to traditional cultivation practices, traditional forms of markets based on small producers and co-operatives, traditional recipes). But the poor in the developed world and increasingly the poor even in developing countries are being drawn away from these earlier healthier forms of food consumption as they get integrated into global supply chains and global food distribution all organised by mega agribusinesses.

The link between local supply and local consumption gets broken, and even in households that cannot afford it, wasteful and unhealthy patterns of food consumption are actively encouraged by

aggressive marketing techniques. These have already had dire health effects in many developing countries. In the Pacific Islands and Melanesia, there are massive health problems and rising mortality associated with high cholesterol, diabetes and hypertension resulting from changing diets over the past generation, driven by corporate food marketing. In South Africa, surveys are finding obesity and malnutrition coexisting in poor children of poor households. In China and India, there is a significant increase in obesity-related diseases - not just among the rich and older population, but even among children and even in families that are not in the higher consumption categories.

It is not just ironic but deeply tragic that even as the better off people across the world discover the joys of local food production and consumption, the less well-off are encouraged or even forced into global supply and distribution networks that do not simply undermine their autonomy but also affect their health and well-being. Since food does reflect society and culture so fundamentally, this reflects very badly on our current globalised culture.

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