

Thomas F. Pawlick, *The End of Food: How the Food Industry Is Destroying Our Food Supply-And What You Can Do about It*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2006 ( 256 pp.), ISBN-13: 9781569803028, US\$16.95.

Reviewed by Yang Zhang

After one week of patiently waiting for four supermarket tomatoes to ripen, Thomas Pawlick wound up his arm like a major league baseball player and lobbed one into his backyard fence. Expecting the tomato to splatter and make a gooey mess, he stood amazed as it “bounce[d] off, undamaged, like a not-very-springy, red tennis ball.” It is Pawlick’s curiosity about the origins of “tennis ball tomatoes” that inspires this book. As a Canadian investigative science journalist with more than 30 years experience and a part-time farmer, Pawlick is competent to address the subject of today’s food system, which he portrays as “dark and satanic.” In *The End of Food*, Pawlick exposes a myriad of problems not only with tomatoes, but with many fruits, vegetables, and meats that form the basic North American diet. His objective is to uncover the cause of the modern food crisis – industrialized food production – and to propose a solution – “acts of subversion” by consumers.

Pawlick particularly cares about consumers’ health and food safety. He notes that the American tomato has lost 16.9 percent of its vitamin C since 1963, the potato has lost 57 percent, and broccoli has lost 45 percent of this crucial nutrient. Other nutrients, such as vitamin A, iron, calcium, potassium, and phosphorous, have also decreased substantially. A lack of any one of these nutrients could be detrimental. Shortages of vitamin C could cause scurvy, for example. A lack of vitamin A may lead to blindness, and the result of iron deficiency would be life-threatening anemia.

Moreover, Pawlick shows that “the little extras,” such as antibiotics, acrylamide, arsenic and bovine growth hormones, added to food to increase yield, prevent diseases in plants and animals, or prolong the shelf life of food, in other words, to maximize profit, could be extremely harmful to human health. He notes that acrylamide, found in processed foods, and excessive bovine growth hormone, can both cause cancer. Pawlick also takes the cases of mad cow disease in Britain and *E.coli* outbreaks in California spinach as demonstrative of how the current food system reproduces problems and why we should care about what we put into our

mouths. His criticisms are familiar, but he makes a very persuasive argument by drawing upon a variety of sources, including academic research and news reports.

Pawlick's credibility is enhanced by the fact that he has both a journalist's talent for describing personal experience in an engaging way and a farmer's understanding of and passion for agriculture. He successfully blends a story telling style with a farmer's knowledge and concern. One story about his ex-neighbor in Quebec effectively demonstrates how large-scale, mechanized, monoculture-based farming contaminated a river, killed fish, degraded the soil, and eliminated biodiversity. A picture emerges of the current food system as a profit-making tool for a small group of big corporations and their executives, which puts most consumers and small farmers at peril.

Are there any solutions? Pawlick says there are.

Not simply interested in sounding an alarm bell and ending the book with a tale of gloom and doom, Pawlick advocates a rebellion against the current food system. He promotes consumer behavioral changes, which are, in his words, "acts of subversion." The first act is planting a backyard garden, using heritage seeds and organic growing methods. For those who cannot grow their own food, Pawlick suggests participating in community or urban gardening and buying food from a local farmer's market. Again, there is not much new here if you are familiar with the growing body of literature on this subject. Still, he goes on to urge people to think critically about their food system and encourages grassroots power to boycott food companies that ignore human health and hurt the environment. He believes grassroots campaigns can influence the direction of food production policy.

Pawlick effectively raises consumer awareness of the detrimental effects of the modern food industry. However, he does not build a connection between his solutions and contemporary agrifood scholarship. Many social scientists find that consumption can be a form of politics and encourage consumers to participate in the reform of the industry through reflexive consumption. If Pawlick had set his argument upon such research, his thesis would be stronger.

The solution Pawlick suggests – to reclaim the food system through localization – may be too simplistic and burdened with problems. He believes that thinking and fighting locally can lead people to "take back control of our own food supply, our own meal and our own humanity." The author is overly optimistic about the power of the local food movement. Many scholars argue that local food system may exacerbate social inequality and lead to defensive localism. There is nothing inherent in local spatial relations to negate inequality. His book would have been

more persuasive if he critically assessed the desire for localism among its advocates and proposed ways to foster its strengths and circumvent its weaknesses.

Despite these shortcomings, *The End of Food* is written in accessible and engaging language and covers a variety of topics in food and agriculture including food nutrition, sustainable agriculture, food safety, rural community development, and gardening. It is a book that could reach a broad audience. For undergraduates studying community, food and agriculture, or environmental sociology, this book could be a good supplemental reading. For individuals who feel strongly about their food quality, safety, and community well-being, it will be a useful guide. For those interested in planting a garden of their own, they will find this book deserves a place on their book shelf because it contains a useful list of resources about organic gardening in the final chapter. Food advocates could also use the book as educational material for food campaigns.

Overall, *The End of Food* is a book worth reading especially for people who care about what they eat and how food is produced.

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