



# Book Food, Inc.

## How Industrial Food is Making Us Sicker, Fatter, and Poorer – And What You Can Do About It

Karl Weber  
Public Affairs, 2009  
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### Recommendation

Could the current food production system be any more problematic? Consider corn, America’s largest food crop. While millions of people around the world starve, the United States insists that its farmers divert 40% of their annual corn crops to produce ethanol, an inefficient biofuel that does little to alleviate the energy problem. Consider factory farms – some of which use cramped holding pens for animals, or confine them in tight metal cages or concrete bins; there farmers inject them with dubious hormones and feed them feathers, poultry excrement, cement dust and rotten food. Edited by writer Karl Weber, this collection of 25 expert articles on food production and related issues reveals shocking facts about our food chain. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to those who want to eat more healthfully, and to anyone who wants to know more about what they are eating and where it comes from.

### Take-Aways

- Food companies often put profit above consumer health, farm workers’ well-being or the environment.
- The food industry expends great effort and expense to ensure that consumers don’t know how it operates.
- Factory farms often subject livestock to horrible living conditions.
- Farm workers, most notably field laborers, live poorly as well.
- Today’s fast-food culture results in obesity and poor health for millions of adults and children.
- Nearly a billion people in the world are hungry, and food prices continue to rise.
- Annual subsidies paid by the US government to corn farmers factor significantly in rising food prices.
- You can promote and ensure sensible food production policies.
- Regain control of the food you eat.
- Buy organic foods and reduce the number of processed foods you consume.

### Summary

#### Dangerous Food

The food supply serves up elements of danger. Some corporations that control the food industry worry more about profits than consumers’ health, the environment, or the safety and well-being of farm workers. Many demonstrate minimal concern regarding the animals they process by the billions annually, condemning most to short lives of pain and mistreatment.

“You are what you eat.”

Many consumers – most alarmingly, children – are now obese, a problem that costs around \$100 billion annually in the United States alone. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta estimates that one out of three American children born in 2000 will suffer diabetes, due in part to their inadequate diet. Already, diabetes and other illnesses related to diet are rising sharply.

“If we ate like humans have eaten for as long as anyone has kept historical records, almost nothing in the supermarket would be on the table.”

Many farm workers and food processing employees work for substandard pay with no benefits, some living in near slavery conditions. In California, a progressive state that accounts for a notable portion of the fruits and vegetables Americans consume, field laborers have almost no rights. Most farmers in developing nations remain impoverished.

“In just one hour in the United States, more than one million land animals are killed for food.”

The food industry is secretive. It does not want the public to know how it conducts business, and its lobbyists continually advocate deregulation. Food industry lobbyists enabled the passage of various “food disparagement” laws (also known as “veggie libel” laws). These laws suppress criticism of food quality and, by inference, food industry practices. All the while, food prices continue to climb, and factory farms in Western nations continue to pollute the water supply and the environment.

## Activist Solutions

Activist groups are now emerging, including Slow Food USA, which champion traditional methods of farming, among other platforms. Many demonstrate their opposition to irresponsible corporations and factory farms by making conscientious food choices. They turn to community supported agriculture programs (CSAs), as well as organic food stores and farmers’ markets. They petition schools to stop serving junk food and urge their government representatives to eliminate farm subsidies and increase food regulations. Yet food public policy has only become worse, particularly since the US eliminated or vitiated many food regulations during the administration of President George W. Bush.

## Factory Farms

Many meat and dairy products that Americans consume come from factory farms, mammoth facilities confining thousands of animals in dreadful conditions. They produce huge amounts of waste, and pollution from that waste leaches into the groundwater. At factory farms, animals receive low-level antibiotics in their feed. Bacteria build up resistance to such minimal antibiotics, which endangers human health. Some animal feed also contains “offal such as brains, spinal cords and intestines.” Workers at some factory farms also feed cattle “poultry litter,” poultry waste from chicken-house floors.

“The fast-food industry didn’t suddenly appear in a vacuum. The industry’s growth coincides neatly with a huge decline in the minimum wage, beginning in the late 1960s.”

In some cases, factory farms confine chickens to cages, each bird restricted to a space that is smaller than a piece of paper. They can barely move or spread their wings. They eliminate their waste where they stand. Farm workers slaughter approximately nine billion such “broilers” annually. During their short lives, these birds receive doses of growth hormones. Some pork-producing factory farms confine pigs to concrete pens. They keep pregnant sows in “gestation crates,” metal stalls so narrow and small that the pigs cannot turn around. Animals have almost no legal protection, though some organizations, such as Humane Eating, are trying to improve conditions for animals in commercial growing facilities.

## Organic and Biotech

Organic foods are nothing new. Until the early years of the 20th century, people everywhere ate organic foods. Natural, organic agriculture will lessen society’s dependence on fossil fuels. Organic foods are healthier, and can help reduce illness and medical costs. Retail giants such as Walmart now sell organic foods and are driving down the prices.

“An estimated two-thirds of all US cattle raised for slaughter are injected with growth hormones.”

Biotech is a newer wrinkle in agriculture. Scientists are developing genetically modified (GM) miracle foods. For example, golden rice is a GM variety that includes beta-carotene, which makes corn yellow and carrots orange. Beta-carotene is a rich source of vitamin A, a key nutrient that helps prevent blindness. Golden rice could become a vital staple for the poor people of Africa and Asia. However, biotech companies hold numerous patents vital to its production. Such companies were at first unwilling to distribute seeds for golden rice to poor African and Asian farmers at no charge, even though governments and foundations helped fund its development. When pilloried by negative press and publicity, the companies later changed their policies, but by then anti-GM advocates had warned the public about the grain’s possible negative side effects.

“Obesity may soon surpass tobacco as the number-one cause of preventable death in the United States.”

Anti-GM activists caution against genetically altered foods, which they term “ Frankenfoods.” They note that the majority of processed foods at the supermarket now contains traces of GM ingredients. What if these ingredients are not safe? In 2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped fund development of a new variety of golden rice, called “3-in-1,” which does not fall under any corporate patents. Researchers and their allies can donate seeds for this new rice to poor farmers around the world. However, anti-GM forces remain opposed and are calling for a “global moratorium” on further development of GM foods, despite the good that these foods might accomplish.

## Ethanol and Politics

Ethanol is another notable agribusiness scientific development. In support of ethanol, the US conducts a misguided subsidies program with numerous negative consequences, including wasteful water consumption, and air and water pollution. Ethanol, which derives from corn, is a sacred cow of the enormously powerful US farm lobby. Corn subsidies totaled \$56.1 billion between 1995 and 2006.

“The huge corn ethanol mandates imposed by Congress in the early years of this century may be the single most misguided agricultural program in modern American history.”

The capital of corn agriculture is the state of Iowa, which is also the site of America’s first presidential primary every four years. Any politician with presidential aspirations must support the destructive and nonsensical ethanol subsidies. Turning a substantial portion of the corn crop into ethanol means that less corn is available to feed hungry people. Congress routinely legislates that corn ethanol must remain part of the fuel mix powering US vehicles even though “if all the corn grown in America were turned into ethanol, it would supply less than 6% of America’s total oil needs.” Meanwhile, despite paying such counterproductive domestic subsidies, the rich nations of the world insist – through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – that developing nations eliminate subsidies to their own poor farmers.

## Global Warming

Most people think of factories belching smoke and millions of vehicles emitting exhaust fumes as the primary sources of the greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. In fact, the food production and distribution system worldwide are responsible for approximately one-third of global warming due to changes in land use (destroying rain forests to accommodate farming or cattle grazing); dispersal of methane and nitrous oxide into the atmosphere (from “animal waste mismanagement”); and greenhouse gas emissions due to food transportation and related factors.

## What Must Be Done?

The food production system is a mess. Legislators must act to protect human health. Necessary steps include increasing the availability of healthy foods, outlawing cruelty to agricultural animals, passing environmental legislation that forces factory farms to stop polluting, and enacting stricter labeling laws so people know what they are eating.

“The grain required to fill a 25-gallon SUV gas tank with ethanol would feed one person for a full year.” – (Lester Brown, in *The Washington Post*)

The time has come to eliminate subsidies for grain farmers. Subsidies should underwrite the production of healthy foods, not of cattle feeds or fuels based on corn or high-fructose corn syrup. People and their governments must radically change the food industry. Consumers’ health – indeed, their lives – depends on what they eat.

## Steps You Can Take

To ensure that the foods you consume are nutritious and promote health, know the sources of your food, particularly meat. Use The Eat Well Guide website to find sustainable food sources. Purchase your food locally. Shop at a farmers’ market. Buy organic foods. Try a reputable food boutique. (The higher prices will be worth it.) Purchase in-season produce. Support small-scale farms and sustainable food production. Some questions to ask local farmers about how they raise their animals include:

- **Beef** – Do you pasture your animals? Do they eat anything other than grass? How do you prepare your animals for slaughter?
- **Dairy** – Do you give cows rBGH or any other synthetic hormones? Monsanto, for example, injects dairy cows with rBGH to increase milk production.
- **Poultry** – Do you confine your chickens and turkeys to small, narrow enclosures? Do they go outdoors?
- **Eggs** – What do laying hens eat? The same questions for meat apply to eggs.
- **Hogs** – Do you raise your hogs outdoors? Do you give them “hormones or feed additives”?

## Better Food and Better Food Policies

You can become involved in improving the food you eat. Unite with your neighbors to create a community garden. Invest in “edible landscaping.” Plant your own garden. You may end up selling some of your homegrown foods to your neighbors. Rally behind robust union programs for farm workers and food industry employees. Lobby your school to serve only nutritious foods.

“America has traded 75 million buffalo, which required no tillage, petroleum or chemicals, for a mere 42 million head of cattle.”

In 2008, 963 million people worldwide could not get enough to eat; 36 million of them live in the United States. These numbers will increase in the future. You can help the undernourished people of the world in several ways:

- Join and become active in One.org, an umbrella group of organizations dedicated to reducing world hunger and poverty.
- Buy only “fair-trade certified foods, nonsweatshop textiles and clothing, and products from companies that promise to pay workers a living wage.”
- Reduce your carbon footprint to cut back on global warming, which negatively affects water supplies, including those used to irrigate crops. Start by cutting your home electric bill by 10%.
- Recycle food leftovers for charity.

“As a culture, we don’t cook anymore.”

To opt out of the unhealthy factory-produced food system, eat better. Avoid “pseudo-foods” and junk foods. Eat fruits, vegetables and whole grains. “Dairy foods...are not a nutritional requirement,” since fruits and vegetables can keep your bones healthy. Chicken, fish and beans are a good substitute for red meat. Fatty fish provide omega-3 fatty acids, which studies indicate help to reduce the chance of heart disease. Pay attention to calories. Choose small food portions. The notable increase in the consumption of sweetened beverages, including soda and juice, closely tracks with the rise in obesity. To control your weight, reduce the amount of sweet

beverages you drink.

“Whenever power is concentrated and unaccountable – whether it’s corporate power, government power or religious power – it inevitably leads to abuses.”

“Entrenched paradigms never move...until outside forces move them. And those forces always come from the bottom up.” Society’s problems in food production, consumption, health and related issues are the sum total of many individual choices. Become part of the solution by setting a positive example. You can make a difference.

## About the Author

**Karl Weber**, a writer and editor, is president of Karl Weber Literary and the co-author of *Creating a World Without Poverty*.

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