



# Introductory essay

Written by the educators who created Reworking the Western Diet, a brief look at the key facts, tough questions and big ideas in their field. Begin this TED Study with a fascinating read that gives context and clarity to the material.

## Sweet and salty, meaty and mega-sized: Introducing the Western diet

If you live in a Western culture, chances are good that your food is quite different from anything your forebears put on a dinner plate. Thanks to the industrialization of food production and procurement, citizens of Western societies (and the affluent members of developing nations) are shopping for, cooking and consuming a seemingly endless supply of relatively inexpensive, high-calorie, highly processed food.

What are the staples in this stream of plenty? Westerners are eating enormous quantities of sugar, beef, chicken, wheat and dairy products, and washing it all down with an amazing array of caffeinated and alcoholic beverages. Americans in particular consume over twice the amount of solid fats and added sugars recommended for daily intake, and they consume far fewer fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains than those who lived in earlier eras — and less than experts recommend for optimal health.

Because of its ubiquity, this particular approach to eating has been dubbed the Western Diet — or, as it's known in some circles, the Standard American Diet, with its condemnatory acronym, S.A.D. And increasingly, it's coming under fire for how it's affecting human health, community life, and the environment.

## Check, please: Calculating the costs of our food choices

Although the industrialized food system eliminated historical patterns of frequent food shortages, its ultimate legacy may be a toxic food environment that's degrading the health of people and the planet. Industrialized agriculture and the government policies that encouraged the mass production of food were intended to facilitate better overall nutrition and health around the globe, but they've also encouraged excess and — ironically — *poor* health in many societies.

We've become particularly adept at producing huge amounts of food, and those of us in Western cultures eat a lot more of it than we used to. The result: A range of troubling health concerns sweeping America and other countries that adopt the American diet. Chief among these, as chef and TED speaker Ann Cooper observes, is the startling rise in diabetes, especially among children.

Yet, as food scholars Chris Otter and Raj Patel have pointed out, a serious paradox exists in today's world: while approximately 1.6 billion people are suffering from conditions resulting from too much food (obesity, diabetes, atherosclerosis), another billion are suffering from conditions resulting from not enough food (hunger,

malnutrition, vitamin deficiency diseases).(i) For these people, food is too expensive, too scarce, or the supply too erratic because of government greed or warfare which prevents equitable distribution. Most of the "stuffed" reside in Global North, while most of the "starved" dwell in the Global South. The financial crisis of the last decade, coupled with skyrocketing oil prices, created in some countries severe food shortages that led to riots.

We must reckon with the reality of finite resources, including the water, oil, and arable land that have driven the modern agricultural revolution. Paul Roberts, in his ominously titled book *The End of Food*, focuses on the degradation of resources and the devastating damage that results from industrialized farming, especially from livestock operations. Because meat figures so prominently in the Western diet, our "ecological footprint" exceeds by a quarter the planet's biocapacity. Additionally, as journalist Graham Hill describes in his TEDTalk, meat production is a significant driver of climate change.

On top of these thorny environmental, political, humanitarian and health-related problems, there's also evidence that our diet may be damaging the basic social fabric of our communities. The rise of fast food, combined with other social and cultural phenomena (from the rise of more single-parent and two-income families, to the creation of cars with built-in cup holders and food trays) have led to changes in how we eat as families. And many observers see this as damaging to family life and even civil society.

## How did we get here, anyway? Feeding an army

In a number of important ways, the modern-day Western diet owes its existence to World War II, which changed the way we produce, prepare, and market food. Doing their part for the war effort, North American farmers delivered record-breaking crop yields, in some measure due to their liberal use of manufactured fertilizers and pesticides (including the new miracle insect killer, DDT). After the war the farmers escalated their use of these chemicals; this, combined with increasingly sophisticated farm equipment and hybrid seed engineering, led to even greater production, much of which was subsidized by long-held government parity agreements.

During the post-war era, the farmers, government officials and agricultural scientists hoped that this increased food production would help meet the needs of a rapidly growing global population. Rockefeller Foundation scientists engineered new seeds designed to produce significantly more grain in countries all over the world, and in doing so ushered in a "Green Revolution." The Green Revolution seemed to work miracles, vastly increasing the amount of food available to people in developing countries. However, it also put a severe strain on local economies, endangered subsistence farmers and indigenous cultures, and accelerated the advance toward large, corporate-type style farming in the United States and elsewhere.

Just as World War II was a watershed era in food production, it also ushered in significant changes in food processing. Military quartermaster departments pounded, dried, stretched and shrunk food in every imaginable way in order to reduce bulk and weight to ship it overseas efficiently and in large quantities. Frozen orange juice, instant coffee and potatoes, powdered eggs and milk, ready-trimmed and packaged meats, and even the ubiquitous TV dinner all either got their start or were perfected with wartime research and technology.

After the war, manufacturers quickly adapted and began producing foods for household consumers. Advertisers and enthusiastic journalists deemed the new preservation techniques "a modern miracle in the kitchen." Marketers and manufacturers were so successful in their efforts that eventually "high quality food" became synonymous with a long shelf life and low spoilage. Subtly at first, and more dramatically later, there occurred a shift in the traditional, seasonal approach to eating in developed countries.

## Drive-thru dining: Fast foods and convenience marts

At the same time that home cooking was changing, a new type of restaurant revolutionized the way that Westerners dined out. New chain restaurants like McDonald's and Carl's Jr. could accomplish what locally- and individually-owned operations had difficulty doing: providing food fast and cheap. Emphasis on economies of scale — purchasing large quantities of supplies and preparing the food in a centralized kitchen to be warmed and assembled at the chain — enabled "fast food," even as such cost- and time-saving techniques lessened the food's quality and nutritional value.

The fast food pioneers standardized a "fast food taste" that endures today: soft white buns, flat hamburger patties, milkshakes made with increasingly less milk and more added preservatives, prepared in exactly the same way at every location in the chain to appeal to the broadest customer base possible. This formula proved successful, and fast food restaurants gained an enormous following, becoming to many a beloved, permanent fixture in mainstream culture. Convenience became the watchword: convenience allowed speedy delivery, which led to speedy consumption.

By the 1960s, industrially produced American "fast food" franchises appeared around the globe. While some countries, particularly in Asia, adopted and absorbed the basic concept and menu onto their gustatory landscape, others, especially in Europe, protested it as an affront to national culture and cuisine.

## A healthier way: The search for alternatives

During the last few decades, we've witnessed an emerging food "revolution" that has attempted to counter, or at least moderate, the worst aspects of the industrialization of food. Those involved in the food movement aim to demonstrate the connection between good food and sustainable agricultural practices, and to create better-tasting, higher-quality food for restaurants and consumption at home.

Since the late 1990s, scholarly attention to food matters has deepened as the academic field of food studies came into its own. Public and political scrutiny of the Western diet has been fueled by popular books by Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Marion Nestle (*Food Politics* and *Safe Food*), and Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*), as well as films such as *Supersize Me*, *Food, Inc.*, and *King Corn*, which have exposed the questionable practices of the food industry and the government's willingness to accommodate food-industry demands. The list is long, and the titles themselves revealing, including: *Food, Inc.: Mendel to Monsanto—The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest* (Peter Pringle), *The End of Food* (Paul Roberts), and *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite* (David Kessler).

Taken together, these works draw our attention to deep problems in the global food supply, problems ranging from health and nutrition, to economics and environment, to corporate control of food production and advertising, to the peril of people and the planet. What emerges is the realization that seemingly disparate and unrelated topics (obesity, environment, flavor, family meals, hunger) are indeed interconnected.

In light of these interconnections, it makes sense that food issues figure prominently in our modern public discourse, and that many are calling for a return to more humane, more harmonious methods of growing, cooking, and eating.

In some sense, this is old news: thinkers from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry have been extolling a closer connection to agriculture for centuries. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people felt alienated by modernism and the industrialization that severed the connection between producer and consumer, an alienation that is still palpable in our relationship to mass-produced, industrial food. For some people, preparing meals from scratch for one's family, using ingredients bought at a local farmer's market, signifies self-reliance, a sense of simplicity, and a voluntary disconnect from the fast pace of our postindustrial, digital era. It can also result in less wastefulness.

Many producers and sellers of food items capitalize on and cater to this alternative vision of food. Indeed, marketers have learned that while the new food culture may not appeal to everybody, it does appeal to a sizable, influential minority. Within this target audience, however, there's considerable disagreement about what exactly constitutes the healthiest, most sustainable approach to food production and consumption: Organic? Locally grown? Vegetarian? Responsibly raised? Grow-your-own? Even this terminology is hotly contested, as food writer and TED speaker Mark Bittman demonstrates:

*“Let me pose you a question. Can farm-raised salmon be organic, when its feed has nothing to do with its natural diet, even if the feed itself is supposedly organic, and the fish themselves are packed tightly in pens, swimming in their own filth? And if that salmon's from Chile, and it's killed down there and then flown 5,000 miles, whatever, dumping how much carbon into the atmosphere? I don't know. Packed in Styrofoam, of course, before landing somewhere in the United States, and then being trucked a few hundred more miles. This may be organic in letter, but it's surely not organic in spirit.”*

Other critics of the Western diet like activist and TED speaker Ron Finley have little patience for what they consider 'elitist' debates about the relative merits of locally-grown or organic goods; for them, healthy food is about social justice. They point out that many people can't even access affordable, conventionally-grown fresh fruits, vegetables and proteins at food stores or markets in their communities. Those who live in these "food deserts" must rely heavily on fast food restaurants and convenience stores, and often suffer a higher rate of diabetes, obesity and other food-related health problems as a result.

The TED speakers featured in *Reworking the Western Diet* tackle the topic from different angles, occasionally contradictory — but all can agree with Mark Bittman when he says, "Now here is where we all meet. The locavores, the organivores, the vegetarians, the vegans, the gourmets and those of us who are just plain interested in good food. Even though we've all come to this from different points, we all have to act on our knowledge to change the way that everyone thinks about food. We need to start acting. And this is not only an issue of social justice...but it's also one of global survival."

Let's begin with Carolyn Steel, who sets the stage by demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between food procurement and the development of cities throughout history. How should we feed an increasingly urban

global population? Steel argues that the answer lies not in our modern, unsustainable food system, but in reworking communities so that food can, once again, become part of the social core of a city.



*Carolyn Steel*

### **How food shapes our cities**

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i. See Otter, C. (2010). Feast and famine: The global food crisis. *Origins*, 3(6), 1-6, and Patel, R. (2009). *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* New York: Melville House Publishing.

<http://origins.osu.edu/article/feast-and-famine-global-food-crisis>

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/stuffed-and-starved/id466320253?mt=11>

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