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Two Books on the Future of Farming

Nutritional, environmental and economic priorities collide wherever seeds are sown.



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By Rien Fertel

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What would a just food system look like? For Mark Bittman, the author of some 30 books on food, we should start by reducing, if not wholly eliminating, our consumption of junk food. “Engineered edible substances,” he calls them in “Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, From Sustainable to Suicidal.” A

“third type of ‘food,’ ”—note his quotation marks—“more akin to poison.”

That poison originates not in your grocery’s snack aisle, Mr. Bittman argues, but on our farms. “Simply put,” he writes, “agriculture has, over the course of human history, gotten away with murder.” Strong words, but arguably fitting for humanity’s “incremental decisions” made over the past 10,000 years, beginning when our omnivorous hunter-gatherer-scavenger progenitors laid down roots—literally and figuratively—by farming plants and animals.

ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, JUNK

By Mark Bittman
HMH, 364 pages, \$28

RESETTING THE TABLE

By Robert Paarlberg
Knopf, 354 pages, \$27.95

The Agricultural Revolution instantly made life a whole lot junkier. Our average life span fell by about seven years. Tooth decay increased. Gender roles and social stratification solidified. Intent on feeding proliferating populations, some cultures overfarmed, stripping the soil of necessary nutrients, leading to crop failure, famine and societal collapse—a process one conservationist labeled “suicidal

agriculture.”

From there, “Animal, Vegetable, Junk” plows headlong into American history. The Columbian Exchange transported slavery and monoculture across the Atlantic. Four centuries later, the U.S. birthed industrial agriculture, the large-scale, intensive production of crops and animals that relies on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, mechanization and, more recently, genetic modification. “It should be the aim of every young farmer,” Isaac Newton, the first U.S. commissioner of agriculture, advised in 1863, “to make two blades of grass grow where but one grew before.”

The 1930s Dust Bowl uprooted millions

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and upended how America fed itself. Soon the federal government instituted the perennial policy of encouraging farmers to, in the words of one secretary of agriculture, “get big or get out.” The John Deere Credit Co., established in 1958, became one of the nation’s largest financial institutions. Big Ag gave rise to Big Food by transforming surplus food into ultraprocessed junk. Subsidized soy, corn and sugar became the junk-crop triumvirate that fills both grocery-store shelves and livestock feedlots. The world now produces too much to eat but lacks the dynamism to sustain its burgeoning billions. “The modern era,” Mr. Bittman writes, “has seen negligence, cruelty, and a lack of compassion starve millions to death.”

“Animal, Vegetable, Junk” covers the scope of human history, yet the historian’s hat doesn’t quite fit Mr. Bittman. Chapters lack narrative cohesion and central characters to help ground and guide the story. The Irish potato famine, the Indian cotton bubble and the effects of the Opium Wars on Chinese grain reserves are all stuffed into three consecutive pages. Less would have added more to the author’s argument.

This book is “not exactly uplifting,” Mr. Bittman rightly admits. Its final chapter offers innumerable federal policy proposals and community- and individual-based recommendations grouped under the umbrella term “agroecology,” defined as “an autonomous, pluralist, multicultural movement, political in its demand for social justice.” Chances are you already adhere to many of these suggestions: supporting local food cultures and businesses, reducing carbon emissions, making better-informed eating choices. So where does that leave us?

“Three things are true at the same time,” Mr. Bittman writes in conclusion, quoting the economic philosopher Max Roser. “The world is much better; the world is awful; and the world can be much better.”

Robert Paarlberg, a political scientist with appointments at Wellesley and

Harvard, is exceedingly more optimistic about the current state of the world's larder. His "Resetting the Table" reads as a rebuke to industrial-agriculture opponents like Mr. Bittman. "The use of modern science is broadly welcomed in medicine, transport, and communications," Mr. Paarlberg writes, "yet it has become strangely controversial in food production."

Mr. Paarlberg recognizes the uphill battle he faces, noting that "nobody will ever try to make a happy children's song about modern industrial farming." (He's right: "Old Monsanto Had a Farm" doesn't exactly sing.) But through a mix of history, science and reportage, he makes a convincing case. He visits John Nidlinger's commercial farm in Indiana, where smart seeds (bioengineered to resist insect attacks) and smart machines (GPS-guided planters and harvesters) help produce more corn on less land, cutting nitrogen use by a third. He points out that Mr. Nidlinger's genetically modified corn, much like the other big GMO crops grown in the U.S. (soy and cotton), are not for human consumption, but rather end up as animal feed, transport fuel and textiles.

Chapter by chapter, "Resetting the Table" demolishes the preconceived beliefs of smart eaters raised on progressive, post-1960s culinary social movements. The author advises against strict locavorism. What matters is how food is grown, far more than how—or how far—it travels. Eighty-three percent of food-based carbon emissions in the U.S. occur on farms. Only 4% is attributable to transportation from producer to retailer.

On organics: Most certified organic food in the U.S. comes from industrial farms, like California's salad behemoth Earthbound Farm, which manages 50,000 acres. By 2003, 80% of organic sales were made under brand names produced by food conglomerates like ConAgra, Heinz and Kellogg.

On the link between livestock and climate change: Though livestock production in the U.S. has doubled since 1961, greenhouse-gas emissions directly attributable to livestock have dropped 11%. The climate burden of a single glass of milk is two-thirds less today than it was 70 years ago.

The author Michael Pollan once advised: "Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." As it turns out, Mr. Paarlberg's great-

grandmother ran a grocery store in Oak Glen, Ill., where the entire inventory available for purchase in May 1888 was made up of 14 items: coffee, sugar, rice, soap, tea, raisins, butter, cheese, eggs, flour, barley, starch, prunes and apples. Good luck making a meal out of that, modern eaters. “The store was located in a farming community,” Mr. Paarlberg writes with delicious irony, “so it was better stocked than most.”

One view that Mr. Paarlberg does share with Mr. Bittman is that junk food has resulted in a public-health crisis, and that snack and cola companies are “conditioning and enabling our behavior.” Even a “healthy” product like Yoplait yogurt contains twice as much sugar per serving as the marshmallow-glutted Lucky Charms cereal—both brands, it should be noted, are owned by General Mills.

“Resetting the Table” is sure to be controversial, and should be widely read and debated. However, its final chapters offer no less nebulous solutions than “Animal, Vegetable, Junk.”

“Since consuming too much food is damaging our health,” Mr. Paarlberg writes, “and since producing all that food (particularly from animals) is damaging our environment, we could address both problems simply by producing and eating less.” Yet the choice to grow and consume less might not be ours to make. A recent U.S. Agriculture Department report found that corn production in Mr. Nidlinger’s Indiana dropped 16% in 2019 from the year before due to “incredible weather related challenges.” If, as Mr. Bittman claims, agriculture has gotten away with murder, the worst crimes are yet to come.

—*Mr. Fertel is the author of “The One True Barbecue.”*

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