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The End Of Food



Synopsis

Salmonella-tainted tomatoes, riots, and skyrocketing prices are only the latest in a series of food-related crises that have illuminated the failures of the modern food system. In *The End of Food*, Paul Roberts investigates this system and presents a startling truth—how we make, market, and transport our food is no longer compatible with the billions of consumers the system was built to serve. The emergence of large-scale and efficient food production forever changed our relationship with food and ultimately left a vulnerable and paradoxical system in place. High-volume factory systems create new risks for food-borne illness; high-yield crops generate grain, produce, and meat of declining nutritional quality; and while nearly a billion people are overweight, roughly as many people are starving. In this vivid narrative, Roberts presents clear, stark visions of the future and helps us prepare to make the necessary decisions to survive the demise of food production as we know it.

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Customer Reviews

This is the second "The End of Food" in a series; the first *The End of Food*, by Thomas Pawlick, was published in 2006. Paul Roberts, a "resource journalist" has also written *The End of Oil*, published in 2005. This time, Roberts explains how we've become used to a food industry that efficiently delivers an abundance of calories with less and less nutrition. What's more, we will never achieve mass production of quality food without an unacceptable loss of calories. The tradeoff is much steeper than is commonly known. We tend to be unaware because as a society we have cared about entertainment as opposed to making informed choices. But that appears to be

changing. Roberts contributes to what I call "Declinist Literature". This genre is currently concerned with the un-sustainability of the world economic order with a focus on America and often drawing on information about the fall of empires past, particularly the Roman Empire. Roberts is one of the edgier voices of Declinism today - he thinks we're in for a radical population decline. The problem, according to Roberts, is that ever-cheaper food provided supply stability for a very long time and that the period of prolonged stability is now ending, ushering in famine and political instability on a grand scale. If Roberts is correct, the food industry will be unable to maintain supply even if quality can be further sacrificed. About one-fifth of all U.S. energy use goes into the food system, not even counting the fuel required to get food to market. Also, water tables are in decline in many agricultural areas and long-term drought appears to be setting into other regions in the world. The lifting and transporting of water to productive land will require increasing amounts of energy.

Robert's "End of Food" includes a lot of good information, but there are probably 200 places where a good editor would've challenged the author to reword or tighten up the manuscript. I wonder whether his editor even read the book carefully, or whether he/she knew enough about the subject to properly edit it. A few examples of the issues I'm talking about: At the beginning of the book Roberts lays out a ridiculously simplified, linear reductionist theory of the role meat consumption played in man's history (except that he rolls it out as fact rather than a small amount of speculation). There are a number of factual inaccuracies that should've been caught or at least reworded. Example: He states that meat is easier to digest than plant foods, which in many cases is simply wrong. Cooked rice, for example, is half-digested before it's even in the stomach. Three times Roberts refers to soil as dirt. In 45 years I've never heard a farmer (or any agricultural specialist) refer to soil (in a field) as "dirt". This carelessness on Robert's part is enough to make thoughtful readers question whether he's been shoddy in other areas too. There are at least a dozen places where he refers to animal manure as poop, which is just plain silly, and makes Roberts sound like a goofball. Imagine if physicians referred to a laceration as a "Bo-Bo" in a medical report, not once, but 12 times? Could you take him seriously? Roberts is very very loose with his date references. Sometimes he's wrong. On p. 118 he states "By the late 1960s the U.S. was in deep economic trouble.....having lost its manufacturing lead to low-cost rivals like Japan...." But in fact in the late 60s very little U.S. manufacturing had shifted to Japan. Roberts is only about 15 years off there.

Roberts essentially shows why the present, agribusiness based, large farm, industrial factory approach to food production, that relies primarily on oil based

fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, and pesticides, is not sustainable. The world has a major food problem RIGHT NOW. This factory approach to food production is breaking down primarily because the price of a barrel of oil is currently at \$139. However, the problem was visible even when oil was priced at \$75 a barrel. The current "modern" chemical and oil based approach was designed for a food production system where the price of a barrel of oil was at \$15-\$20 a barrel. The costs of chemical farming are going through the roof as the price of a barrel of oil continues to skyrocket upward. Other factors are exacerbating the problem. First, it takes about 8 pounds of grain to make 1 pound of red meat from cows. Rising incomes in countries like China and India are leading to an increased preference for more red meat consumption in the diets of people in those countries. This new added demand is starting to raise the price of all of the food chain elements. Second, the biofuels (like ethanol) emphasis is a blunder. Biofuels do not substantially reduce the dependence on imported oil for the USA and merely reduce the supply available for food production for people to eat. Third, the current economic subsidization of agribusiness by the taxpayer in America is simply multiplying the problem. Third World farmers are going out of business in large numbers as imported and subsidized American grain undermines their ability to feed their populations locally.

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