

An American History of Perceptions of Food

Richard Plate

Ann Vileisis, *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get It Back*, Island Press, 2008.

In *Kitchen Literacy*, Ann Vileisis investigates the gulf—spatial, temporal, and psychological—between those who produce food and those who consume it. More specifically, she’s concerned about the effect that this gulf has had on our relationship to the foods we eat. The inquiry began while purchasing food. “I started to wonder,” explains Vileisis, “Why did I consider some things but not others? Why did I *think* the way I did about food?” [p. 4.] She approaches this question by looking into what people thought about their foods in colonial America, a time when people grew most of what they ate, and tracks the numerous shifts in thought that took us from that world to one in which many claim not to have the time to cook their own foods, much less grow them.

Note that the focus here is not at the industrial level, though Vileisis does provide contextual information about technological and industrial shifts in food production. Rather, it is on the consumer, and what the consumer thought about these shifts. To those who were raised in a world of fish sticks, TV dinners, and foods sealed in cans decorated with pictures of vegetables or farms that have only a symbolic relationship to the contents inside, it may come as a surprise that each of these technological advancements were met with doubt by many of the consumers at the time. However, the response over time to these advancements—prompted by the desire for cheap, convenient foods in a more urbanized society and aided by the craftsmanship of those marketing the new foods—was what Vileisis calls a “covenant of ignorance.”

In a sense, this covenant suited everyone’s needs. Vileisis explains, “Food manufacturers did not want to be pestered by careful scrutiny of their ever-changing production methods. . . . And housewives did not want to be bothered with knowing details,” because such knowledge detracted from time that could be better spent on other pursuits. “In short,” Vileisis concludes wryly, “knowing less seemed to offer women more.” [p. 171.] She goes on to describe how this covenant was maintained by redefining what was important to know about one’s foods, for example trading personal knowledge of food production for trust in a reliable brand name. The resulting tale has the feel of a Greek tragedy in which the combined actions of rationally behaving individuals create a system that jeopardizes the individual and collective health of the producers and consumers.

I have two criticisms of this book: one minor and the other perhaps unfair. First, Vileisis paints with an awfully broad brush when she describes contemporary alternatives to the conventional system of industrialized food production, seeming at times to equate small-scale sustainable farming with organic farming. While the overdependence on fossil fuel fertilizers and pesticides has come as a part of the industrialized agricultural system, we have two distinct issues at stake here. Vileisis’ primary focus is the disconnect between food producers and consumers, which results in almost complete ignorance of how our foods are

produced. One result of this ignorance is the inclusion of hazardous chemicals in food production.

While the issue of these chemicals is an important one—and one that no doubt has played a large role in the recent trend toward a more active interest in knowledge about the production of our foods—in her final chapter, “Kitchen Countertrends,” Vileisis gives a disproportionate level of attention to this issue at the cost of giving short shrift to other criticisms raised regarding the covenant of ignorance. These other criticisms include the potential social costs of shifting from small-scale farms to industrial ones, the quality of life of animals providing meat and dairy products, and a general lack of awareness regarding our dependency on environmental systems.

Vileisis could quite rightly make the point that if she’s given the lion’s share of her countertrend attention to organic food production, it is because pesticides have received the lion’s share of the consumer backlash regarding industrial food production. Nonetheless, I was disappointed at the lack of discussion devoted to how these shifts in the way we think about our foods relates to the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to environmental systems. This is my second criticism. While Vileisis does an admirable job of illustrating step-by-step how consumers came to accept foods as natural despite having little resemblance to their pre-processed state, I would like to see more about what a consumer’s preference to not think about the process by which his food has reached his plate says about his broader relationship with environmental systems. But that topic is perhaps beyond Vileisis’ goal for this book.

In short, Vileisis does a fine job of illustrating how something as seemingly mundane as a supermarket shelf holds stories as complex and significant (psychologically and globally) as any environmental challenge facing us today. And in doing so, she provides much needed perspective regarding how we think about our foods. Equally as important, *Kitchen Literacy* may act as a case study of social marketing. Time and time again in Vileisis’ account, food companies were faced with the challenge of changing deeply held assumptions about what might qualify as healthful and wholesome food. Over the course of roughly two centuries, we have gone from a society whose members expected to know on which pasture the cow supplying their meat was fed or in which stream their trout were caught to one in which we are content with box-shaped bits of food labeled cryptically as “fish” or “meat parts.” Surely there is a lesson here regarding how we might foster the shift back toward a consumer desire for greater knowledge about the food that sustains us. The story Vileisis tells in *Kitchen Literacy* provides a sense of perspective regarding our contemporary food preferences. In the end, what we do with that perspective is up to us.