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Fresh: A Perishable History



Synopsis

That rosy tomato perched on your plate in December is at the end of a great journey—*not* just over land and sea, but across a vast and varied cultural history. This is the territory charted in *Fresh*. Opening the door of an ordinary refrigerator, it tells the curious story of the quality stored inside: freshness. We want fresh foods to keep us healthy, and to connect us to nature and community. We also want them convenient, pretty, and cheap. *Fresh* traces our paradoxical hunger to its roots in the rise of mass consumption, when freshness seemed both proof of and an antidote to progress. Susanne Freidberg begins with refrigeration, a trend as controversial at the turn of the twentieth century as genetically modified crops are today. Consumers blamed cold storage for high prices and rotten eggs but, ultimately, aggressive marketing, advances in technology, and new ideas about health and hygiene overcame this distrust. Freidberg then takes six common foods from the refrigerator to discover what each has to say about our notions of freshness. Fruit, for instance, shows why beauty trumped taste at a surprisingly early date. In the case of fish, we see how the value of a living, quivering catch has ironically hastened the death of species. And of all supermarket staples, why has milk remained the most stubbornly local? Local livelihoods; global trade; the politics of taste, community, and environmental change: all enter into this lively, surprising, yet sobering tale about the nature and cost of our hunger for freshness.

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Customer Reviews

Fresh is an engagingly original way of looking at food history, both thought-provoking and

entertaining. (Mark Kurlansky, author of *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell*) This is the right book at the right time. Freidberg provides a masterful account of the complex web of labor practices, technological innovations, corporate controls and consumer choices that have produced the items that confront us each time we open the refrigerator door. *Fresh* successfully uses the stuff of everyday life to explain complex historical, cultural, and social phenomena. After reading this compelling work, you'll never look at a carton of eggs the same way again. (Carolyn de la Peña, University of California, Davis)

In this lively and compelling book, Freidberg unearths the secrets within our refrigerators as she explores what is natural and unnatural about freshness. How have commerce and industry shaped our seasonless abundance? Where did the fruit grow? How far have the beef and fish traveled? Whose labor and risks do the vegetables hide? *Fresh* shows why such questions matter as it reveals how our notions and expectations of fresh food changed over the last century. It challenges us to look differently at our food. (Pamela Walker Laird, author of *Pull and Advertising Progress*)

Freidberg opens the fridge on a world few have considered: how the advent of cold storage subverted ideas of freshness, shifted power from consumers and producers to middlemen, and virtually eliminated seasonality. We all like lettuce in February, but Freidberg's ingenious and spirited *Fresh* serves to remind us of its technological, environmental, and social cost. (Elizabeth Royte, author of *Bottlemania* and *Garbage Land*)

In this highly readable and sophisticated book, Freidberg traces the ambiguous history of freshness in food. Despite its 'natural' associations, freshness has been produced, engineered, marketed, and valued in a variety of ways over the course of the last century. Broadly accessible, richly comparative, and written with flair, *Fresh* will appeal to a wide audience. (Julie Guthman, author of *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*)

Fresh paints a fascinating picture of our changing views of perishable food... It is the historical detail of *Fresh* that throws so much light on why we now eat the way we do... Freidberg writes elegantly and goes beyond the technical to draw out this paradox at the heart of today's culture of consumption: we have ended up with a food system that promotes both novelty and nostalgia, obsolescence and shelf life, indulgence and discipline. (Felicity Lawrence *The Guardian* 2009-05-02)

Freidberg--tracking the movement of beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk and fish from source to table--shows how technology, abetted by modern public relations, has changed the way we eat... Freidberg writes with wit and clarity, and her sense of humor extends to her choice of illustrations. (Aram Bakshian Jr. *Wall Street Journal* 2009-04-25)

Few can read this thought-provoking book without thinking that although the benefits of modern food production are real, they are bought at an extravagant price. We could, if we tried, be more sensible in our demands on farmers, more resistant to the lures of advertisers, more thoughtful about the origins of

our food, and more alert to the effects food production has on the environment and the people who produce it. Ms. Freidberg's book is a good place to start because it unravels the tangle of science and economics that puts food on our tables. Readers will find that the word "fresh" will never be quite the same again. (Claire Hopley Washington Times 2009-05-26) Fascinating and meticulously documented... Even as some of us beat a path to the farmers market or CSA, the history [Freidberg] describes affects the selections available and their path to our refrigerator. She gives us much to ponder and presents it in a highly readable volume largely devoid of value judgments. I learned a lot. Give it a read. It will indeed give you a fresh look at your food. (Janet Majure foodperson.com 2009-06-08) A dietary-cum-social history of the Mark Kurlansky/Michael Pollan sort, this smart, sweeping, and timely volume--appearing at a moment when buying locally and eating organically are fashionably responsible quests--considers the conundrums of industrial freshness. According to Freidberg, a Dartmouth professor, we all crave access to healthful, seasonal foodstuffs, yet we hunger equally for year-round convenience and value. The result: to open a refrigerator is to access a Pandora's box of compromise and freighted trade. Cold storage, Freidberg argues, has altered tastes, damaged the environment, hurt the consumer, and helped facilitate the less-than-salutary shift from localism to globalism. The stories of six staples--beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk, and fish--both reinforce her thesis and stand as discretely engaging narratives, each rendered with clarity and flair. Food, truly, for thought. (The Atlantic 2009-07-01) In *Fresh*, Susanne Freidberg chronicles how expectations about beef, fish, milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables have shifted over the past century. Freshness means more than the absence of biochemical decay. It is bound up with our notions of purity, nutrition and beauty. And these ideas have adapted to the rise of a technology that most of us now take for granted--refrigeration. (Jascha Hoffman Nature 2009-06-18) Six categories of food are placed under the microscope in this survey of shifting cultural values. Beef, eggs, vegetables, fruit, milk, and fish are each examined in Freidberg's extensively researched and engagingly written account. (Lara Killian popmatters.com 2009-07-10) All in all fascinating and clear evidence for the protean nature of freshness... By the end of the book, the reader is acutely aware of the point that [Freidberg] reinforces in her brief epilogue, namely that freshness comes at a price, that there is no utopia of freshness, and that the ability to enjoy fresh foods is a privilege of the wealthy parts of the world... For anyone who is interested in figuring out the basic ideas that inspire contemporary eating and food production, *Fresh* is essential reading. (Rachel Laudan rachellaudan.com 2009-08-05) French fruit farmers, Argentine cattle ranchers, Mexican dairy farmers hidden from view in pastoral Vermont and Hong Kong seafood aficionados all enter into this lively and edifying account. The book includes a sweeping survey of how ideas of freshness vary

culturally, but have invariably been influenced by urbanization and globalization--and by technological innovations that preserve the illusion of straight-from-the-source freshness...It is a lively, engaging book. (Prashanth A K Times Higher Education 2009-09-03)[A] meticulously researched social history of our relationship with perishable food. (P.D. Smith The Guardian 2010-11-06)

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For most of her life, my grandmother kept her milk, eggs, and butter in the spring house on her Missouri farm. Through the 1940s, my mother subscribed to a twice-weekly delivery of ice for her icebox, and in 1951, bought a Crosley "Shelvadore." I have a refrigerator-freezer that makes ice and dispenses cold water, and another freezer for garden vegetables and fruits. Times have changed. In *FRESH: A PERISHABLE HISTORY*, Susanne Freidberg opens the refrigerator door on a fascinating aspect of our modern American food culture: how the search for "fresh" food has shaped what we buy, cook, and eat. We take the refrigerator so much for granted that it's almost impossible to imagine what eating was like before--and what it is like now for those who can't afford to participate. But we didn't always have ice on demand and mechanical refrigeration has been around for only a century. In her first chapter, Freidberg's first chapter establishes the technical context for her discussion of the extraordinary changes that have taken place in our diets and eating habits in the last hundred years. The "cold revolution" changed the geography of fresh food, she says, making it possible for perishable foodstuffs to travel around the globe and for seasonally-available fruits, vegetables, and meat to appear on our tables year-round. Refrigeration gives us the ability to consume very old food and still happily imagine it as "fresh." Take meat, for instance. As hunters, humans have always eaten wild meat, but Freidberg points out that eating domesticated animals has been, until recently, a "seasonal and regional luxury." Most people ate plant-based diets with the occasional addition of locally grown and processed meat. But after refrigerated railcars (chilled first with ice, then mechanically) made it possible to deliver meat from the meat-packing center of Chicago to consumers on the East Coast, "fresh" beef became less of a luxury and more of a perceived necessity. "Mobile meat," dependent on cross-country and global transport, convinced consumers "not only that fresh beef could come from far away, but also that their main relationship to meat--and indeed, to all once-living foods--was as consumers." This helped to create the disconnect that now plagues us, "between cities and their pastured hinterlands, between shoppers and their neighborhood butchers, and between people who bought the meat and those who dressed

it in faraway slaughterhouses."But refrigeration didn't affect just meat, and it has created other hidden effects that we don't often think about.* The "cold chain" allows us to have fresh eggs throughout the year and permits egg producers to create larger and larger egg-producing factories with detrimental impacts both on the local environment and on local small-farm competitors.* Refrigeration (enhanced by huge industry-funded marketing efforts) encourages us to desire beautiful if bland and tasteless out-of-season fruit. Advertising has taught us that "beauty is a mark of freshness," a beauty that is rarely more than skin deep.* Refrigeration enables us to enjoy fresh vegetables without going to the work of growing them ourselves, and disguises the "hidden dependence" of growers on cheap, often undocumented migrant labor. The value we place fresh vegetables, Freidberg says, has "contributed to the historic undervaluing of the human labor that produces them."FRESH makes one thing abundantly clear. Our contemporary American food culture is totally dependent on refrigeration. Without it, we would have no meat, eggs, milk, vegetables, fruit, or fish, except what we could grow ourselves or purchase locally, for immediate consumption. As Freidberg points out, refrigeration enables us to enjoy a richly varied and much safer diet. But because of it, we have become a culture of consumers dangerously removed from the work of managing our food and suffering from the ills created by overconsumption of meat, the injustice of cheap labor, and the depletion of natural resources. The "Cold Revolution" has created a comfortable world that may be too costly to sustain.

This is in many ways a serious analysis of the history of dealing with a sample of perishable foods. It's seriousness is reflected in 59 pages of notes and a 38-page bibliography, both remarkable for a book whose primary text is 283 pages (at least in the hardback version). But it is written in an easy-to-read, one could even say "fresh" style, making it a pleasure to read. The narrative is filled with great stories, interesting personalities, and clear accounts of the technical aspects of preservation. As has been noted in other reviews, it is primarily a story of the impact of refrigeration on our access to foods at risk of spoiling. The six examples used to tell the story -- beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk, and fish -- are common to the diets of many of us, giving the story a lot of direct relevance. The tension between local and global is another major theme, and reminds us of how difficult it is to be a locavore. All-in-all, a splendid volume.

This book is well-written and provides a lot of interesting references/information. Rather than being an agenda driven condemnation of the US food system, it provides an interesting detail of how our food system has evolved over time. Definitely a worthwhile read.

Boring read but great info.

text is excellent. i bought the kindle edition and it is missing all the images. for each image, it actually says to refer to the print edition!! how incredibly lame is that?

This is an odd book, not the usual academic product of Belknap, a publisher noted for excellent academic style books. This book is accessible and gracefully written, despite an impressive array of scholarly "apparatus" (which means notes and bibliography). This is a history of refrigeration, but also a history of accepting the idea that refrigerated food could be fresh. Fresh once meant, for meat for example, freshly slaughtered, but refrigerated meat could still be fresh after a long period in refrigeration. It took a surprisingly long time for that idea to be accepted. The book's focus is mostly the US and Europe. It discusses a wide array of related topics, such as labor, political interference, while focusing on several food categories. The most interesting chapter is the last, on milk. Refrigeration meant that dairy cattle didn't have to be located very near market cities, and changed the geography of production and marketing.

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