

Fast Food Nation Summary

By Eric Schlosser

Have you ever heard of cognitive dissonance? Well, when it comes to food, many of us are guilty of knowing that what we're eating isn't good for us, but continuing anyway. It's okay to succumb to guilty pleasures once in a while; we're human, and as the saying goes, 'to err is human.' However, according to our author, being oblivious to the global behemoth that is the fast food industry is no longer an option. Being informed about this industry is essential, because it's not just about the food they sell us; there are more sinister aspects to the business model.

Fast Food Nation uncovers the unsavory aspects of the food industry and globalization. Even if you've never eaten fast food, you've been impacted by it, and world-renowned and award-winning investigative journalist Eric Schlosser is here to tell us why.

In this fascinating exposé on the fast food industry, we're taken through the history of how we got to where we are today in terms of food production, and how the contemporary food chain has changed. Not only has food production impacted climbing obesity rates and health problems, but it's also had devastating economic and social effects. While we're also told what goes into producing a typical fast food burger, it's the ethical ramifications that also leave a lingering bad taste. So if you're brave enough, let's briefly look a lot closer at those friendly colorful buildings, serving us up those familiar favorites.

The Golden Arches

The story of fast food begins in the 1950s. The war was over, and suburbia was a safe-haven, and a place to enjoy the new burgeoning consumer lifestyle. With this new lifestyle came automobiles, and with the automobile came roadside drive-in restaurants. The stage was set for a new way of thinking about food. Fast and convenient became the two most important keywords.

Enter the McDonalds brothers, who revolutionized how restaurants prepared and served food to customers. The brothers developed the "Speedee Service System," which aimed to streamline the production process and get food expedited as quickly as possible. They changed the food preparation method, and they standardized the food, which meant that having professional cooks became redundant. By creating an assembly line of food production, the McDonalds method cut huge costs and maintained exacting standards. They developed a formula for fast and efficient consistency.

You may have heard of Ray Kroc before. He's often seen as the villain in the story of McDonalds. Ray Kroc was the driving force behind franchising the McDonalds system. He came up with the McDonalds family restaurant's mission statement and ethos, and he's also responsible for trademarking those famous golden arches.

While McDonalds' ethos and mission statement centers on family, community, service, cleanliness, quality, integrity and value, this book reveals that there's a much darker side to many of these big corporate food chains.

The Dark Side of the Force

If you look at the marketing of many fast food restaurants, they focus on family and good wholesome living. In fact, many of them are drivers of the American way of life. Schlosser reveals that what's being presented to us in the front stages of the American fast food chain, isn't reflective of what's going on behind the scenes.

Here the term "McDonaldization" may be useful. McDonaldization is a term coined by the sociologist George Ritzer in 1993. It refers to the interesting phenomenon that because of globalization, the world is becoming increasingly homogenous. The trouble with homogeneity is that it tends to promote what the dominant culture is selling. And sure, as Schlosser argues, there's nothing wrong with the wholesome all-American lifestyle that's shown to us on posters and television adverts, but what we're not seeing are the numerous exploitative practices by this huge industry. Not to mention all of the knock-on effects that have resulted in multiple social, environmental, political, and health issues.

Kids in Candy Stores

You've heard of the saying about kids and candy stores, right? Well, there's been a lot of research on the effects of marketing and advertising targeted at children. Children want what they can see, and they have extraordinary powers of persuasion. So despite their minimal income stream, children and teenagers are an incredibly powerful target market.

The 1980s was an era where this really escalated, because in most households, both parents began working and spending more time at the office. The television became known as the "babysitter," and companies took advantage of this to influence a whole new market. Children are the perfect market because they're like sponges and are highly susceptible

to advertising messages. What's more, parents often feel guilty for not spending enough quality time with their children and then overcompensate in a bid to keep them happy.

If you're a parent, or someone who has spent a lot of time with kids, you'll know how much sway children have regarding decision-making. How often have you wondered about whether a restaurant is kid-friendly, whether there's a playground available, or appropriate menu options for them? Ultimately, even though parents pay the bill, a lot of the time, kids dictate where to eat.

McDonalds was one of the first restaurants to cotton on to this idea, and many others followed suit. Do you remember sending away tokens found on cereal boxes for special toys? Do you remember finding a toy inside your cereal box? If you remember this, you know how much sway toys have on dictating a household's cereal's popularity. The type of cereal was just an incidental; the toy was really what mattered the most. McDonalds took this idea to the next level when it introduced the infamous "Happy Meal."

McDonalds is the Pied Piper of fast food chains. It created McDonaldland filled with colorful mascots, including Ronald McDonald, Hamburglar, Grimace, and Mayor McCheese. McDonaldland didn't just exist at McDonalds restaurants, but also on the television. Adverts were mini-series, containing these familiar characters trying to get their hand on their favorite McDonalds menu items. And what do you think happened when McDonalds introduced breakfast items to their menu? Enter a new loveable character, Birdie the Early Bird, from stage right. These characters became part of the mise-en-scene of McDonalds, they became Happy Meal toys, and they became etched into the minds of children all over America. It didn't stop there; if you've ever looked into

the history of Happy Meal toys and collector's items, you'll see how aggressive McDonalds was, in appealing to children. By appealing to the idea of collecting, and focusing on fads and trends, they secured a very loyal Fanclub of young people. It's no wonder that a whopping 90% of American children between three and nine, eat at McDonalds every month.

However, things really took a turn for the worse when fast food chains and soda companies started targeting schools. Numerous food and drink businesses actively canvassed and brokered deals with schools to promote their products. Not only were buses and hallways plastered with advertising, not only did some of these companies offer sponsorship deals, but some went as far as to provide their food in school cafeterias.

Did you know that 30% of public high schools sell branded fast food?

Unfortunately, this all paints a very bad picture when it comes to educating and encouraging young people to embrace healthy lifestyles.

Would You Like Fries with That?

Some people might think that working at their favorite fast food joint would be the perfect job. How difficult can it be to flip burgers, pour sodas, and punch a customer's order into the till?

The job isn't exactly difficult, which is one of the primary reasons it's so easy to exploit workers. The trouble is, when a job is easy, and anyone can do it, this leaves the gate wide open for exploitation.

Because anyone can do these jobs, your average fast food worker is the

type of person who can easily be exploited. Teenagers, the elderly, migrants, and the differently-abled, often find themselves overworked and underpaid by this system.

If you know anything about factory work or assembly-line productions, you'll know that the tasks are pretty monotonous, and it doesn't take very long to learn them. What this means is that the workforce at fast food restaurants is largely dispensable. Workers seldom have any agency, and as a result, there's an incredibly high turnover rate. Your average fast food worker lasts less than a quarter of a year before they quit or are fired.

So you have a situation where you have cheap labor, and labor that's not particularly difficult to train, so replacing staff members is very easy. What's more, the drive towards automation to increase efficiency and lower costs, has also made much of the workforce redundant.

And if you're made redundant, or exploited in any way, you're unlikely to receive any support. The majority of the industry is heavily anti-union, and if workers try to protest, they're victimized or fired. Schlosser says that the situation is so dire, that not one fast food worker in America has union representation.

A Game of Monopoly

You'd think that the fast food industry has done great things for American farming? Surely in the game of supply and demand, the more demand you have, the happier your suppliers are? Well, in this case, you'd be wrong.

Your typical serving of McDonalds fries costs \$1.50. How much of that money do you think goes to the potato farmer? The answer is roughly two cents. Big corporations have had an incredibly adverse effect on farmers because of their demands and the fact that they have created monopolies. Farmers are forced into accepting low prices for their crops, which has had a horrific knock-on effect on the whole agricultural sector.

But how did this start? Well, remember earlier when we mentioned consistency and exacting standards? To maintain this magic consistency, your raw materials have to be consistent. So this means that when you start out, you may begin by supporting a few local farmers, and then a few more, and then if you're McDonalds, you're getting your beef from nearly 200 local farmers. However, then things change, and as you expand, you realize the need for consistency, so you create firms instead of farms. Nowadays, there are only five major beef suppliers to McDonalds.

The fast food industry in America has created packing plants and firms, which have all of the purchasing power. Farmers have little to no agency, and they often end up selling their farms to these large agrifirms, and then to rub salt in their wounds, they end up working on the very farm that they had to sell to make ends meet.

What They're Packing

The meatpacking industry has a history of unethical practices towards both animals and their workers.

As with the fast food industry, the meatpacking industry works under a lot of the same principles. It relies on assembly line processing methods

and cheap labor. Many of the workforces are illegal immigrants, homeless, or refugees, which means that they have very little agency and are desperate for work and income. The industry avoids paying for basic healthcare, annual leave, and discourages unionization.

Working condition in meatpacking plants and slaughterhouses is hazardous. In America, it's the most dangerous working environment where the incidence of injury is three times higher than in any other factory type. The combination of hazardous equipment, lack of training, and the need to speed up production is lethal. It's little wonder that so many workers are injured while on the job. And compensation for injuries is minimal.

How much is a finger worth to you?

According to the meatpacking industry, it's as little as between \$2200 and \$4500.

Packed Full of Flavour

Isn't it amazing how fast food menu items taste the same no matter where you eat them? Whatever brand of fast food you eat, menu items taste the same whether you're eating them in New York, Texas, New Orleans, London, or Hong Kong. It's extraordinary how consistent the food is.

Consistency comes at a cost. It not only impacts the agricultural sector, but it affects our health. Have you ever looked at the label on a tub of strawberry flavored icecream? The clue is that word "flavor." Most grocery store icecreams aren't made with real fruit; they're flavored with

fruit. Likewise, the strawberry or banana milkshake you're drinking at your favorite fast food restaurant contains flavorings. The flavor industry is a huge business, and it's a significant factor in creating food that tastes homogenous. This homogeneity is one of the primary reasons why all fast food menu items have a uniform taste. The problem with artificial flavors is that it's a relatively unregulated industry, and flavor companies don't have to disclose what's in their flavor compounds. So when you read "artificial flavor" on a fast food item, it could be absolutely anything.

Fast food isn't just packed full of artificial ingredients, but disturbingly they've also been attributed to a very high incidence of contamination. Owing to how meat is processed, and how it comes from very few meat plants, means that if meat is contaminated, it spreads like wildfire.

E. coli outbreaks have become a lot more common since the rise of fast food. In 1997, 25 million pounds of contaminated meat was eaten at Burger King because their centralized beef processing plant was affected by E. coli. The effects of E. coli are particularly dangerous for children, and there have been numerous cases where children have been hospitalized, or died from eating contaminated fast food.

In Conclusion

America has the worst rate of obesity among industrialized countries, and the problem has massive social, economic, and health impacts. Schlosser states that by 2001, health issues relating to obesity rose to \$240 billion. With the rise of Globalization and McDonaldization, obesity has become a global health crisis, with obesity rates and associated health risks skyrocketing throughout the globe.

Anthony Bourdain famously stated that 'Food is Politics.' By taking us deep into the underbelly of the fast food industry, Schlosser shows us the true cost of the industry. He also shows us that the current political system is failing us at every turn, regarding what this industry is doing to its people. It's incredibly ironic that a business model aimed at serving the core American values, has resulted in something that's actually destroyed these values.

So next time you pull up to your favorite fast food joint and are greeted with, 'Can I take your order?' it might be worth asking yourself how much it's really costing you.