Food—not the first subject most people think of to tell the story of history and culture. Upon reflection, however, what better subject could there be? At the base of human existence, food plays a role in virtually every arena that is important to our lives: from the rituals of daily life, leisure activities, and aesthetic pleasure, to politics and government, war, social interchange, and commerce. Food fuels—literally and metaphorically—economic practices (domestic food-relief programs), social movements (lunch counter sit-ins, counter-globalization rallies, and protests), business–government relationships (agriculture and farm subsidies), and international policy (famine relief and military alliances). Food not only helps determine both individual and collective identity, but it is also deeply enmeshed in political institutions and economic health. In fact, the consumption of food is an extraordinarily social activity laden with complex and shifting layers of meaning. Not only what we eat, but how and why we eat, tell us much about society, history, cultural change, and humans’ views of themselves.

Food has always played a major role, and the ways in which it is produced, processed, distributed, controlled, consumed, and portrayed reveal not only the hierarchies of power, but also the subtle, multi-leveled challenges to that power by groups and individuals in society. Whether minimally processed foods (wheat, cooking oil), industrially manufactured
items (instant ramen, Coca-Cola), or hand-made creations (tamales, holiday sweets), people imbue particular foods with deep-seated meaning and emotion and will go to great lengths to preserve or promote them, regardless of whether they are involved in their production (farmers, processors) or merely their consumption (tea drinking). Not only is food intimately, and intricately, tied to group image, but it is bound to national identity, and a nation’s power or lack thereof. Since food is power—and an abundance of food can mean a surfeit of power—nations have been shaped, blessed, and at times intellectually and socially hindered by the availability of food in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the time period with which this volume of *A Cultural History of Food* is concerned.

Until the last couple of decades many in academia did not view food as a fitting topic in its own right. Prior to this current popularity there were earlier academic studies of food, originating mainly in anthropology, folklore, and the *Annales* school, which regarded the study of food as key to understanding cultures and societies, and individuals’ lives within them. Food did not fit a traditional standard of worthiness in most traditional academic disciplines. It was not seen and understood in political or intellectual terms, nor was it analyzed aesthetically. And when considered at all, food was often regarded as quotidian, seemingly mundane, and decidedly female. Frequently, food was employed as an indistinctive backdrop through which to study, for example, labor relations (workers in canning factories and slaughter houses), agrarian political movements (New Deal-era food production), or twentieth-century industrialization (the rise of food-processing conglomerates). However, as social and cultural history combined to explore the intersection of everyday life, especially the experiences of women and minorities, with the consumption of all manner of objects, many more topics were deemed worthy of scholarly inquiry, including food. Eating, after all, is much more than ingesting nutrients for biological survival: food plays a significant role in social relationships, is a highly symbolic element in religious and magical rites, aids in developing and maintaining cultural distinctions, and assumes enormous significance in shaping individual identities.

After all, not only does everyone have to eat (and ideally several times daily) to survive, but also all the great civilizations, both ancient and modern, meticulously recorded by historians and philosophers, have essentially
risen and fallen according to rulers’ abilities to feed their constituents successfully. The salience of recent debates concerning food safety, global environmentalism, and the effect of food production on indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide, and the renewed interest in high-quality, minimally processed food, culinary tourism and fine dining, combined with ever-rising rates of obesity and its adverse consequences, gives this history of food in the modern era rich potential.

This volume examines food from 1920 to the beginning of the twenty-first century: what was produced, processed, distributed, and consumed, under what circumstances and to what end, and how these foods changed over time within a larger framework of society, politics, economics, culture, and important events. Further, it will use the production and consumption of food as a lens to examine the effects of such watershed events as the devastating First and Second World Wars; the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as world superpowers; population booms and the shifting landscapes as cities shrank and swelled again with new immigrants; struggles for independence, civil rights, and democracy; and the uncertainty but also creativity of the so-called post-industrial, post-Cold War era of globalization.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF MAJOR EVENTS

It is virtually impossible to summarize accurately the history of the modern era around the globe, and do justice to every nation, every group of people, and every key event across continents—attempting to do so would result more in a list of events than an exploration and interpretation of the role of food in modern history. Despite the challenges, however, it is important and useful to at least point to key events, as the modern era is replete with transformative developments that directly affect the production and consumption of food. To begin, think of the dramatic changes that occurred between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. Those born in the 1920s whose lives spanned much of the century entered into a markedly different society than the one in which they left. In the 1920s, for example, most farms were devoid of electricity and indoor plumbing, and airplane and automobile travel was unthinkable for most people. By the early twenty-first century, the world was a dramatically
different place. Modes of communication evolved from the radio to the telephone, television, and satellites. Computers were an integral part of late-twentieth-century society and have continued to rapidly evolve. Technology, as applied to industrialization and mass production of goods, similarly fostered dramatic changes in people’s lives. While industrialization and mass production of goods had begun prior to the modern period, they continued to make dramatic inroads with regard to all-important aspects of life, particularly food production and processing. Industrial processing, the development of plastics, artificial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, and refrigeration, for example, all had dramatic effects on food, culture, and society.

The modern era, 1920–2000, also experienced dramatic development and change with regard to political and social institutions, systems of government, and social movements, including the demise or continuation of colonialism, democracy, fascism, and communism. De jure colonialist regimes were replaced with de facto colonialism, despots, and corruption. Both the West and East conducted their own evil actions: Jim Crow segregation and other indignities in the United States, the European Holocaust, as well as Japanese domination and cruel treatment of those in other Asian countries. Yet struggling independent nations also emerged during this period. Post-colonial independence in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, India/Pakistan, the formation of the state of Israel and its ensuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the emergence of the European Union—all took their place on the world political stage. Much of the emergence of more democratic states was a result of those protesting and fighting for equality and human rights: Mohatmas Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. All took place against the terrible backdrop of global and regional warfare in the modern era: World War II, the Cold War, the American wars in Asia (Korea, Vietnam) and the Middle East (the Gulf War), hot and cold wars all over the globe, between industrialized nations, between developing nations, between the mighty (United States, Soviet Union) and the meager who wore down and outlasted the superpowers (the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, American wars in Asia and the Middle East). Further, growing impatience with totalitarianism led to counter-culture protests around the world, in Europe, the Baltic countries, the United States, China (Tiananmen Square), and elsewhere.
THE 1920s THROUGH POST–WORLD WAR II

The early period, the 1920s through to World War II, for many were decades of dark, looming uncertainty and destruction. A significant portion of the globe emerged from the Great War battered and despondent, if not devastated by the unprecedented scale of death and destruction. Irish poet William Butler Yeats’ famous lines, penned in 1919, embodied an era’s pessimism. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned;/The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.”

The war ushered in economic booms and busts, leading to a sustained global depression in the 1930s. The power vacuums left by the Great War led to totalitarian dictators (Tojo, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco) who quickly capitalized on the political instability to rise to power, control society, and eventually bring the globe to the brink of disaster with World War II. Avant-garde art, philosophy, literature, and film all embodied a pessimism and disillusionment.

In this era there emerged a noticeable shift in food and consumption habits. The industrialization of the food supply allowed greater variation in people’s diets and their nutrition subsequently improved, though it can be argued that canned goods and other processed foods diminished taste and nutrients, leading to acclimation to salt and sugar in heavy quantities. To sell these mass-produced items the early twentieth century witnessed the proliferation of communications’ firms creating increasingly sophisticated advertising. The increased number and circulation of magazines and newspapers, and the growth in population and literacy rates ensured audiences for corporate advertising.

After the worldwide depression of the 1930s, and the destruction from yet another, even more wide-spread and destructive world war, the United States was one of the few to emerge from World War II with its industries and economy thriving, signaling the arrival of what Time publisher Henry Luce deemed the American Century. The war had changed, accelerated, and altered the production, manufacturing, and advertising of industrialized food, setting the stage for the remainder of the century. During the war North American farmers, with fewer workers, had managed to produce
food at record-breaking levels, in part because of the liberal use of manufactured fertilizers and pesticides, including the new miracle insect killer DDT. After the war the continued reliance, and increased use, of such elements combined with more and more sophisticated farm equipment and hybrid seeds led to even greater production (much of which was subsidized by long-held government parity agreements).

After the war U.S. farmers, agriculture scientists, and politicians turned their attention to providing adequate food for the postwar world, ultimately through famine relief and crop production. Surplus food purchased by the government was sent abroad to help alleviate and temper the global famine conditions wrought by drought and wartime destruction. United States’ aid under the auspices of the Marshall Plan pumped in some $12.5 billion to rebuild European economies and infrastructure, with several billions going to Asia, particularly Japan, as well. Still, to help answer the demands of the rapidly growing global population, Rockefeller Foundation scientists engineered new seeds designed to produce significantly more grain in countries all over the world, and ushered in what was christened the Green Revolution (discussed in detail in chapter 1). The Green Revolution seemed to work miracles, vastly increasing the amount of food available to developing countries. Yet it also put a severe strain on local economies, endangered subsistence farmers, the environment, and even indigenous cultures, and accelerated the advance toward large, corporate-type style farming in the United States and elsewhere.

As in farm production, World War II provided the catalyst for the postwar boom in food processing. Military quartermaster departments pounded, dried, stretched, and shrunken food in every imaginable way in order to reduce their bulk and weight to ship them overseas efficiently and in large quantities. Frozen orange juice, instant coffee and cocoa, cake mixes, brown-and-serve rolls, dehydrated soups in little plastic bags, instant potatoes, powdered eggs and milk, ready trimmed and packaged meats, and even the ubiquitous TV dinner all either got their start, or were perfected with wartime research and technology. After the war the food industry quickly adopted the knowledge and technology and began producing food items for domestic consumers. Advertisers and enthusiastic journalists deemed the new preservation techniques “a modern miracle in the kitchen.” The technology so pervasively permeated the global food
supply that eventually high-quality food became synonymous with food capable of a long shelf life and low spoilage. Some of these new food products made their way more quickly into homes than others, of course.

Commercial canning and bottling—well established by the early 1920s and rationed during the war—reached a golden age in the 1950s as new materials, new methods, proliferation of products, and a larger percentage of household budget went to processed foods. Consumers’ use in particular of canned foods kept increasing through the postwar years because of their convenience and their ability to remain stable for several years. In many rural areas still lacking in refrigeration and electricity, canned foods were integral to rural long-term food supply.

As food production increased and food costs declined, consumption of food in general went up. The new processing techniques resulted in a phenomenal increase in the number of food products available to consumers, and a corresponding expansion and alteration of grocery stores to accommodate them. Subtly at first, and more dramatically later, there occurred a shift in the seasonal manner of eating experienced by those in developed countries. The increased number of freezers in homes, for example, allowed for the purchase of more frozen items, and also allowed women to buy large quantities of fresh produce and freeze it for later consumption. Further, faster, more efficient methods of shipping (especially reliance on air cargo) allowed fresh fruit and vegetables to be more widely available year round. Similarly, fresh seafood was more frequently available in the land-locked regions.

To keep up with the overwhelming number of new food products, grocery stores also underwent a radical transformation in the postwar era. In the early part of the century most grocery stores were small corner shops, with the grocer standing behind the counter to retrieve items at a shopper’s request. Between 1890 and 1950, however, grocery stores became larger and were often supplied by a central warehouse. Chain grocery stores rapidly proliferated, introducing branded food products to consumers. Thus while larger, self-serve supermarkets existed before the war, specifically the A&P, Piggly-Wiggly, and Tesco chains, after World War II they became a permanent fixture on the landscape, eventually swallowing the older style grocery store, as well as contributing to the decline in such specialty stores as butchers, fresh-fruit markets, and bakeries. Supermarkets, as the
name implies, expanded in size as well as number to accommodate the plethora of products brought to market with regularity. The new supermarkets developed specialized departments, including areas for baby food, gourmet items, self-serve meat departments, baked goods, produce, and dairy. Because such stores allowed customers more freedom to pick up and inspect items, brand names, eye-catching labels, and advertising became more prominent in the hopes of attracting customers.

**FOOD AND COLD WAR POLITICS**

While much of the U.S. food supply was shipped overseas to the military, Allies, and newly liberated countries, consumers received their fair share. United States’ food rationing, except for sugar, was quickly dismantled at war’s end, largely at food manufacturers’ insistence. Rationing continued in most European countries for several more years as nations rebuilt farms and transportation systems ravaged by the war. While Americans made many sacrifices during World War II, including the mandatory rationing of food and other items, they experienced little (except for those who had fought in the war or who had lost loved ones) of the horrible devastation wrought in other countries. Food, though often in limited supply, was available in sufficient quantities thanks to farmers’ and agricultural workers’ hard work, as well as a successful rationing program.

By early 1946 international reports revealed the grim details of the world food situation. The war, combined with drought conditions, had threatened crops in Europe, North Africa, India, China, and other parts of Asia, reducing the 1945 total estimated world-food production by 12 percent per capita below prewar levels. Further, estimates of the 1946–1947 world harvest, while slightly better, were predicted to come in at below postwar levels as well. European production was 25 percent below normal. In France, when the government’s collection of flour ran well below expected levels, citizens staged bread demonstrations. Officials in Italy similarly were forced to reduce bread rations and faced similar protest. Even England was short of food and would experience several more years of rationing and shortages.

Outside of Europe the situation was far worse. Australia and parts of South America were hit by drought. Mexicans, experiencing prohibitive
inflation, were spending 90 percent of their income on food. India was ex-
expecting conditions to worsen quickly. Food shortages in China were acute,
particularly in the Hunan province. Korea was running out of food. In
Japan people were receiving only 520 calories per day in rations, and the
country was hardly in shape to produce sufficient rice. In total, an esti-
imated 500 million people around the world faced famine conditions.5

World supplies of food to relieve the famine were limited. The United
States, Canada, Great Britain, and a handful of others were the only coun-
tries in any kind of position to export grain, and only the United States
emerged from the war producing more food than it had before World
War II. In fact, American food production maintained record levels, about
one-third above the prewar average. Enough food was available for U.S.
citizens to consume about 3,300 calories per day, well above the average
amount required. In contrast, most in Europe and elsewhere had fewer
than 2,000 calories a day, for 28 million the number was 1,500 calories per
day, and for some as few as 1,000 calories per day.6 By contrast, American
consumption, even with domestic rationing during the war, had actually
increased. Moreover, signs indicated that American postwar-consumption
levels would dramatically increase even further.7

By 1946, it was clear that the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation
Administration (UNRRA), the organization in charge of famine relief, would
not survive the widening rift between the United States and the Soviet
Union—former wartime allies and now Cold War rivals. As relations be-
tween the East and West became increasingly adversarial, the Soviet Union
found itself backing away—as well as being invited to back away—from
united nations’ relief and turned toward taking care of countries within
its own sphere of influence. In 1947, the United States withdrew its sup-
port of UNRRA, effectively killing the organization, and practiced what
the UNRRA’s Director General Fiorello LaGuardia disparagingly called
“bread diplomacy,” a policy of aiding only those countries whose politics
were acceptable to the United States.8

In fact, relief efforts directed at the East were never really taken se-
riously for a variety of reasons, including a strong historical orientation
in general to Europe and a view of Asia, especially India and China, as
so-called lands of famine that could never be altered. Food aid quickly
became tied to politics. Given Truman’s policy of containment, American
officials deemed it top priority to use food to envelop Western Europe into its sphere of influence while giving up, as it were, on China and to a large extent India, despite pleadings from such well-known Americans as Albert Einstein and Pearl Buck.9

The United States limped along in its efforts to meet international food needs until the formulation of the Marshall Plan, which in 1948 finally became a coordinated, government effort to rebuild war-ravaged western European countries. A large percentage of relief was food- and agriculture-related. Of the $4.2 billion in aid furnished during the first year and a half of the Marshall Plan, fully 39 percent consisted of food, feed, and fertilizers. During the entire program, 29 percent of a total aid package of $13.5 billion was committed to these three resources. This was of tremendous benefit not only to Europeans but also to American farmers. Agricultural exports in the 1950s and 1960s remained steady, 22 percent of total exports, worth billions of dollars to American farmers.10

Postwar American relief, whether through the auspices of the Marshall Plan or through private organizations, garnered tremendous effect symbolically as well as materially, helping to transmit elements of American culture across the globe. Aid from CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) was perhaps most prominent, so much so that the phrase CARE package became a generic term. CARE, originally a consortium of private organizations banding together to respond to the postwar famine, shipped thousands of food packages over to war-torn Europe. The first 20,000 packages arrived in 1946 in France, and over the next two decades 100 million more were sent to Europe, and eventually to Asia and other developing countries.

The first packages were US Army surplus 10-in-1 meal packages, so called because they contained 1 meal for 10 soldiers in the field during the anticipated invasion of Japan (never used, of course, because of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Included in the packages were an abundance of meats (beef in broth, steak and kidneys, liver loaf, corned beef, Spam, bacon), fats such as margarine and lard, sweeteners such as honey, sugar, jam, chocolate, and raisins, as well as powdered eggs and milk, and coffee.11 The tremendous symbolic and cultural effects of the CARE packages were not lost on famine-stricken Europeans, as through them they became acquainted first-hand with the abundances of America,
“an overflowing shop window,” one historian has noted, “which displayed the overwhelming achievements of the American economic system.”

As farmers continued to produce food at record levels in the postwar era, the U.S. government continued to buy surpluses to distribute as part of foreign-aid packages, a pattern that continued through the latter half of the twentieth century. Public Law 480, Food for Peace, put into effect in 1954, made the practice permanent, as commodity surpluses would be regularly donated to needy countries. “Food can be a powerful instrument for all the free world in building a durable peace,” declared President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Yet it was impossible to separate food aid as charitable work to the needy not only from foreign policy, but from disposal of farm surplus as well. Even as people were receiving needed aid, the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), an arm of the USDA, referred to the aid as “surplus disposal.” “Remember,” the Secretary of Agriculture told FAS
employees in 1955, “that our own primary mission is to help U.S. farmers. Any unnecessary diversion of our efforts to other enterprises dilutes our effectiveness and runs counter to the expressed wishes of those who gave us our assignments.”

Thus in the postwar era the United States hoped to have it all: distribute aid to needy countries, keep farmers contented, and maintain political dominance. It seemed impossible to keep Cold War politics out of even domestic agriculture, processing, and consumption. A 1956 New York Times headline demonstrated the political climate with regard to food production. “World Crops 120% of Pre-War Rate: Output Keeping up with Rise in Population, U.S. reports—Free World Lead Reds.” “Free world per capita production is 100 percent of pre-war,” the article reported, “and the Communist area output is 91 percent.” Abundant processed food was similarly held up as a badge of superiority. “State’s Canned Food Exceeds All Russia’s,” read a New York Times headline in 1953. “New York State produces two and one-half times more canned goods a year than all of Russia,” the Times reported the vice president of the American Can Company saying. “The figures clearly indicated,” the canning executive went on, “the difference in the energy and know-how between the Soviet Union and the State of New York.” Supermarkets began to be hailed as the “shining food palaces of today,” and indeed became a symbol of American political, economic, and cultural dominance in the Cold War era. It became common practice that when foreign dignitaries toured the United States, including the Queen of England and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, their itinerary would invariably include a typical American supermarket. The press dutifully reported the awestruck visitors’ responses to the aisles and aisles of goods. “If Queen Elizabeth is a symbol of Britain,” surmised one columnist, “the supermarket is a symbol of the United States.”

The overflowing abundance of American supermarkets was difficult to ignore in Cold War politics, which pitted capitalism against communism. Ultimately, the abundance of processed foods exhibited on grocery store shelves became a metaphor for the political, economic, and cultural supremacy of the United States. Indeed, American manufacturers with the help of the U.S. Department of Commerce began to take their wares abroad to world expositions. While industry and government had cooperated to
stage a supermarket exhibit in Rome in 1956, it was the Supermarket USA display at the 1957 International Trade Fair in Communist Zagreb, Yugoslavia that stirred the most interest—and criticism. Here over 600 American manufacturers supplied more than $200,000 of equipment and merchandise to create a 10,000 square foot modern supermarket stocked to the gills with products. Designed to be viewed as a “dramatic and practical vehicle to demonstrate the American standard of living under ‘people’s capitalism,’”19 shelves were laden with all kinds of the latest products. And while Supermarket USA displayed some fresh produce and dairy products, it was the highly processed and packaged items that captured the spotlight: prepared baby foods, soup mixes, canned soups, cake mixes, instant coffee and tea, juice concentrates, prepared meat loaves, cut-up chickens, and a wide range of frozen food. What was intentionally American about the display, clearly, in addition to Supermarket USA’s large size and overflowing abundance, was the highly processed nature of the food, as well as the individual independence allowed through self-service shopping.

Supermarket USA proved to be a hit with Yugoslavs, so much so that the Christian Science Monitor reported that the Soviets, “in the Soviet bid to outdistance the American shopping cart,” felt the need to drive attention away from the United States’ exhibit by “launch[ing] an air attack on the American supermarket,” offering fairgoers helicopter rides from the Soviet pavilion.20 “The Soviets have only a few consumer goods on display,” the newspaper reported, whereas “the American pavilion...is loaded with consumer goods.”

**FAST FOOD, GLOBAL FOOD**

In addition to supermarkets, industrially produced fast food became another major export of American culture, with McDonald’s being the most prominent brand. Shortly after the end of World War II, the McDonald brothers of San Bernardino, California, set up a bare-bones eatery with the goal of selling hot and tasty, but cheap, food. After realizing that the hamburgers were their biggest sellers, the brothers streamlined their operation, and focused mainly on hamburgers, milkshakes, fries, and coffee. Businessman Ray Kroc, who supplied the milkshake machines the McDonald’s brothers were ordering in multiples, visited the McDonald
brothers’ joint to find out why they needed eight of his machines—each of which mixed five shakes at a time. Upon arrival Kroc witnessed long lines of customers waiting to purchase hamburgers at fifteen cents each, milkshakes for twenty cents, and hot coffee at five cents a cup. Most interestingly to Kroc, the food was being prepared by workers assembly-line style, and people received their orders in record speed. Knowing a good business opportunity when he saw one, Kroc went into partnership with the brothers, and quickly bought them out, though retained the McDonald’s name. Kroc refined and popularized the assembly-line food production, calling it the McDonald’s speedee service system. So popular were the restaurants that the chain quickly developed into the most frequented restaurant in the country. By 1963, fewer than ten years after Kroc took over the operation, McDonald’s served its billionth hamburger.21

Fast-food chain restaurants could accomplish what locally and individually owned operations had difficulty doing: providing food fast and cheap. Emphasis on economies of scale—purchasing large quantities of supplies, and preparing the food in a centralized kitchen to be warmed and assembled at the chain—led to fast food, even as such cost-saving techniques led to a declining quality. The result, however, was the fast-food taste, and it was appealing to most customers: soft white buns, flat hamburger patties, milkshakes made with increasingly less milk and more added preservatives, flavors, and a uniformity in taste pitched so as to appeal to the broadest customer base possible. The restaurants gained an enormous following, becoming to many a beloved, permanent fixture in mainstream culture. Convenience, then, became the watchword: convenience allowed speedy (speedee) delivery, which led to speedy consumption. Fast food was above all convenient, and while some countries, especially in Europe, protested it as an intrusion on national culture and cuisine, others, particularly in Asia, adopted and absorbed the basic concept and menu onto their gustatory landscape.22

An abundance of food led to the need, or perceived need, to reduce intake, and the modern era witnessed the full-fledged world of diets and dieting taking hold in the Western world, particularly in the United States. In the 1920s Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters, a Los Angeles physician, published Diet and Health, with a Key to Counting Calories, and introduced the idea of counting calories.23 During the Depression and World War II, dieting
understandably declined in popularity as food became less available and the problem for most became getting a well-balanced diet with enough nutrients and calories, instead of too many. However, dieting returned in the postwar period, and by the 1980s, as ideal body sizes grew smaller, and as food became more and more available at all times of the day and night (thanks to twenty-four-hour diners, supermarkets, and fast-food restaurants), dieting, and its accompanying eating disorders, grew prevalent. Fads and dieting advice seemed to change annually: low-carb, low-fat, high-protein, grapefruit only, dieting according to blood type, the Scarsdale Diet, Pritikin, cabbage soup, the list goes on and on. The second wave of Atkins’ and other low-carbohydrate diets took the United States by storm in the late-1990s and early 2000s. What remains constant is that Americans, and increasingly, others around the world, will continue to try to suppress their appetites with limited, if any success.

After World War II, and especially toward the end of the twentieth century, there emerged a type of globalization that differed from that of earlier eras both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Technological advances led to lightning-speed communication around the globe, while economic institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and policy (NAFTA, GATT, WTO agreements) decidedly shaped economics and trade. Populations shifted as immigrants traversed the globe for work, and it became easier than ever to travel long distances for pleasure as well. Global interconnectedness occurred with regard to culture. Western culture disseminated across the globe, as did cultural influences from emanating Asia and Africa, especially beginning in the 1980s–1990s. While food has always functioned as a form of cultural capital—a way of exhibiting one’s wealth, status, and savoir-faire—with the rise of late-twentieth-century mass industrialization and globalization this practice only intensified, and in the process, endangered the viability of certain traditional foods and foodways.

Further, the 1990s witnessed increased full-fledged agribusiness and farm consolidation, with farmers increasingly beholden to seed and fertilizer companies. While consumer fears and boycotts challenged biotech production, by the 2000s most of the corn and soybeans planted in the United States were biotech, with increasing percentages in Brazil, Mexico, and elsewhere. Europe, by contrast, resisted to a great extent the production and
consumption of biotech crops. The ongoing tensions between the European Union and the United States continue to be played out through politics and trade negotiation. Further, urban sprawl made farmland expensive and farmers found it difficult to resist selling to developers. Environmentalists and farmers (not historically in alliance) began to band together to save farmland as well as wild lands. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century there emerged as a result a counter-movement to big agriculture: organic food production, more emphasis on locally produced, small-scale, seasonal production of food that led to fresher, better tasting products, more interaction with producers and the consuming public, and in many cases, less damage to the environment.

As a response to what many saw as the worst effects of the industrialization and globalization of the food supply, there emerged in the late twentieth century small but stubborn efforts to stem the tide. While in the early twenty-first century organic agriculture is still a small percentage of total food production, it has grown at accelerated rates. With conventional farming and food corporation profits generally on the flat side, large food conglomerates began to purchase smaller, organic production enterprises, a phenomenon that has given rise to the dilemma of the so-called Big Organic: a type of agribusiness that, while it eschews petroleum-based products, its scale leads to other compromises (including exploitative use of migrant labor) that the traditionalists regard as counter to the original mission and purpose of organic.  

A watershed moment occurred in Italy in the 1980s when a McDonald's was about to open near the Spanish Steps in Rome, resulting in the founding of Slow Food. The organization, dedicated to combating the erosion of local food and traditional foodways, struck a chord with people around the world. While criticized at times as elitist, the Slow Food organization became a major player in the movement to undo the excesses of cheap, industrialized food. Further, in North America and elsewhere food activists hoped to reconnect citizens with the land and the food they ate through a promoting farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture organizations, urban garden projects, and children’s cooking and gardening projects, and other projects designed to support local farmers, promote biodiversity in produce, and get people to eat foods in season, and buy organic and environmentally friendly products. Other events included grassroots’ Spam
festivals, corporate boycotts of Starbucks and McDonald’s, and staging subversive food theater, including throwing pies in the face of Monsanto executives, Bill Gates, the Secretary of Agriculture, and other prominent forces in American, and global, society.

As with philosophy or practice, these phenomena also demonstrated a desire to maintain a cultural distance from mass-produced food for cultural or aesthetic reasons. Especially for Europeans, for example, such events as the French farmer, who in 1999 ransacked the local McDonald’s to protest the encroachment of the United States into local food cultures, and boycotting Coca-Cola as the symbol of global hegemony, were also largely about maintaining cultural distinction through food. American foods and food habits, according to many, have always bordered on the vulgar. Such American symbols as McDonald’s and Coca-Cola that have been marketed around the world represented touchstones for the growing apprehension concerning globalization. For the people of plenty, as well as people around the globe, it remains to be seen what lies ahead for food through the twenty-first century.

THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LANDSCAPE OF FOOD: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Thus, few would argue with the premise that food has taken on new importance in recent decades, in large part as a reaction to the industrialization of the food supply. In the last few decades in many parts of the world, we have witnessed an emerging food revolution that has attempted to counter (or at least circumvent) the worst aspects of the industrialization of food. Yet this recent interest in food has historical roots that reach back centuries, as food has always been central to the rise and fall of civilizations, even if not overtly acknowledged by their leaders and chroniclers. In his book *Meals to Come* Warren Belasco provides an intellectual history of world hunger and the debate over the ability to provide sufficient food for all. Belasco examines in nuanced detail how each generation of Western philosophers, economists, politicians, and fiction writers has framed and evaluated that dilemma, and divides the discourse into two main camps. On one side are the pessimists (Thomas Malthus and his intellectual offspring), who argue that there will never be enough food to feed us all. On the other side are the optimists—Belasco
terms them the *cornucopians*—who see science and human ingenuity as sufficient to meet each generation’s challenges and shortcomings. Throw in the egalitarians (William Godwin, Frances Moore Lappé)—those who see the problem as less about quantity than about equal distribution between the haves and have-nots—and you have the basic theoretical positions that keep cropping up over the centuries. What is interesting to note is the culturally bound nature of these debates, especially in terms of writers’ definitions of what constitutes *enough* food. Invariably the discussions turn to meat, and it is startling to see successive generations of European and American thinkers worrying about having enough meat, with many fretting that the West will be reduced to so-called coolie (grain-based) diets.25

Those involved in the recent food movement have worked to demonstrate the connection between good food and sustainable agricultural practices and to create better-tasting, higher quality food for restaurants and consumption at home. Since the late 1990s, scholarly and political attention to food matters has deepened as the academic field of food studies has emerged, and as popular books by Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Marion Nestle (*Food Politics* and *Safe Food*), and Michael Pollen (*The Omnivore’s Dilemma*), as well as films such as *Supersize Me*, *Food, Inc.*, and *King Corn*, exposed to an interested public the questionable practices of the food industry and the government’s willingness to accommodate food-industry demands. The list is long, and the titles themselves revealing: *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the Food System* (Raj Patel), *Food, Inc.: Mendel to Monsanto—The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest* (Peter Pringle), *The End of Food* (Paul Roberts), *Manger: Français, Européens et Américains Face à l’Alimentation* (Claude Fischler with Estelle Masson), *Slow Money: Investing as if Food, Farms, and Fertility Mattered* (Woody Tasch), and *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite* (David Kessler), *Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating* (Mark Bittman), and *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* and *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manifesto* (Michael Pollen). Taken together they manifest an awareness of deep problems in the global food supply, problems of all kinds ranging from health and nutrition, to economics and environment, to corporate control of food production, advertising, and consumption, to the peril of people and the planet. What emerges is the realization that seemingly disparate and unrelated topics (obesity,
environment, flavor, family meals, hunger) are indeed interconnected. Taken together, a cluster of themes emerges. With various emphases, all address the ethical, health, environmental, and aesthetic issues, as well as the anxieties about cultural and social reproduction that have been central to the discussion about food production and consumption in the last decade.

What cultural and material currents underlie this interest in, and anxiety about food? First is the sheer amount of food that is available, at least in the Global North, with all the ramifications, positive and negative. The United States, as well as other nations, has become particularly adept at producing huge amounts of food, and we eat a lot more of it than we used to. The industrialization of agriculture, combined with government policies and politics encouraging the mass production of food, is a double-edged sword, of course. While it has facilitated better overall nutrition and health, it has also allowed excess and, ironically, poor health. While some critics wonder whether the uproar over rising rates of obesity is fueled less by health concerns and more by superficial cosmetic responses, and by a diet and food industry who benefit from the current landscape of food consumption, there are important health concerns that cannot be dismissed, such as the startling rise in diabetes, especially among children. Combine the sheer abundance with the omnivore’s dilemma—the anxiety created by the multitude of food options—and it is easy to understand the well-fed human’s predicament in the twenty-first century.

Yet as Chris Otter and author Raj Patel each observe, a serious paradox exists in today’s world: while approximately 1.6 billion people are suffering from conditions resulting from too much food (obesity, diabetes, atherosclerosis) another billion are suffering from conditions resulting from not enough food (hunger, malnutrition, vitamin-deficiency diseases). Most of the stuffed reside in the Global North, while most of the starved dwell in the Global South, though there are plenty of people in developing nations suffering from the so-called diseases of affluence. Often the elites of any country, rich or poor, exhibit similar levels of consumption, and generally eat a cosmopolitan cuisine by virtue of their wealth and access to specialty goods from around the globe. The late-2000s’ financial crisis coupled with skyrocketing oil prices created severe enough food shortages in some countries to have led to food riots. In fact, notes Otter, more people are hungry today than at any other time in history.
The “stuffed and starved” paradox is directly related to the inequities in the global food supply: “It is part of a single global food crisis, with economic, geopolitical, and environmental dimensions. It is perhaps the starkest, most basic way in which global inequity is manifest,” writes Otter. Unfair trade agreements, tariffs, and subsidized agriculture that produce surpluses of grain are then dumped onto developing countries, whose own farmers cannot compete with the cheaper, abundant food on the market. Patel assigns blame to the multinational food and seed corporations who control the food supply with iron fists, strong arming governments to bow to their demands to keep their seeds in production, and the crops in their control. Spiraling grain prices, increased meat consumption, climate change and other types of environmental degradation, combined with market manipulations, together demonstrate “how the basic act of eating a piece of bread or meat binds consumers seamlessly with distant farmers, large corporations, energy systems, economic forces, and international politics.” A large portion of the world’s population gets too little food (it is too expensive, too scarce, the supply too erratic because of government greed or war which prevents equitable distribution) while an even greater proportion gets too much (too much available, too cheap, too tempting, too few regulations, too unhealthy).

Further, adding to the landscape of anxiety is that we now must reckon with the reality of finite resources: the water, oil, and arable land that have driven the modern agricultural revolution. Paul Roberts, in his ominously titled book *The End of Food*, focuses on the degradation of resources as well as the devastating damage done to land as a result of industrialized farming, especially of livestock. According to the World Wildlife Fund, notes Roberts, “our ‘ecological footprint’ exceeds the planet’s biocapacity by about 25 percent…the largest piece of that footprint…comes from producing food, especially meat.” Here we see the convergence of two twentieth-century movements: environmentalism and the delicious revolution begun by California chefs and others, which was among the first to tout local, sustainably produced food as being not only the most healthful and nutritious, but also the best for people and the environment. What Europeans and others knew all along took Americans decades to rediscover.

There are also fears that industrial food culture has damaged the social fabric as well as the environment. The rise of fast food combined with
other social and cultural phenomena (more single-parent and two-income families, cars built with cup holders and food trays) have led to changes in domestic food practices, which have, in turn, been viewed as having affected family life and even civil society. Whether this is accurate is unclear but likely more complicated. While I think it is possible (as some do not), for example, to have a meaningful meal prepared from a microwave or around a table of fast food, it is true that by its nature, quickly produced and quickly eaten food changes the qualitative experience of a meal. It makes sense then that food issues are a prominent part of the public discourse in the twenty-first century. For many, careful consideration of the food one eats and serves one’s family and friends helps fill a spiritual void. Only a return to more humane, more harmonious methods of growing, cooking, and eating, the thinking goes, will help restore a spiritual connection with the land, with our food, and with each other.

This is not new, of course; thinkers from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry have been preaching these ideas for centuries, but as we have entered the twenty-first century, these notions have taken a qualitatively different turn. As Jackson Lears has demonstrated about mass production in general, in the nineteenth century many people felt alienated by modernism and the industrialization that severed the connection between producer and consumer; that alienation is still palpable in our relationship to mass-produced, industrial food. Seeking local, seasonal food today, then, can be viewed as a version of the early twentieth-century critique of mass society, in which a return to artisanal food functions as a bulwark against the ease and reproducibility of mass-produced, industrial goods—indeed, pap and gruel were frequently employed metaphors used by critics to describe the fare produced by the media and entertainment industries. For many people, preparing meals from scratch for one’s family, using ingredients bought at a local farmer’s market, signifies self-reliance, a sense of simplicity, and a voluntary disconnect from the fast pace of our postindustrial, digital era. It can also result in less wastefulness. Many producers and sellers of this alternative vision of food capitalize on and cater to these kinds of desires. Indeed, marketers have learned that while emphasizing the new food culture may not appeal to all (in fact, it may not appeal to the majority), it does appeal to a sizable, influential minority. Supermarkets have become willing to stock their produce section with organic fruits and vegetables, and even
if they do not sell readily, they are attractive, powerful loss leaders that may draw customers into stores and bring them back again. Nonindustrial food (and *industrial organic food*, as Michael Pollan terms it)\(^{32}\) is simply more readily available in most parts of the industrialized world, and that availability is shaping consumption and food habits, at least in certain parts of the globe.

Thus, this recent discourse about food represents a genuine attempt to integrate complex issues linking aesthetics and ethics with health, the environment, family life, social issues, and notions of taste—issues the public might not have recognized as having much in common. Further, today many are more cognizant of the origins of their food, something that became increasingly more difficult in much of the modern era as the connections weakened between producer and consumer. For most of the twentieth century many had little reason to think about and understand the origins of their food: how it was grown or raised, under what conditions, how it was processed, and how it reached the market or the restaurant. If the contemporary conversation about food falls short in any area, it is in addressing the difficult but crucial issue of getting all this healthy, sustainable (more expensive, less widely distributed) food to people of little means. While many applaud the agenda of Slow Food, the work of Alice Waters, or the writings of Carlo Petrini and Michael Pollen, detractors on both the left and the right criticize it as elitist and unrealistic.\(^{33}\) Finally, many of these writers and activists envisioning this grand theory of food see little difference between science and poetry, between applying rational thought and romantic sentiment to food problems and issues. For them, all knowledge, all emotion leads to the same point: a refashioned food system incorporating sustainable practices, cultural sensitivity, good nutrition, and taste. Such a system, according to this view, in the long run is the most practical and economically viable.

**THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME**

A distinguished panel of scholars has taken on the challenge of assessing multiple facets of food in the modern era. In his chapter on production (chapter 1), Jeffrey Pilcher examines agriculture through the lens of industrialization and scientific advancement with its ensuing effects both
positive and negative. “The basic trends toward food production over the twentieth century,” explains Pilcher, “have been toward greater concentration, standardization, and globalization.” Not only grain, but produce, animal livestock, and aquaculture have followed the same trajectory: more food produced, more land or water required to produce the food, more resources devoted to production, greater environmental stress as a result. Thus, while food production has increased exponentially, Pilcher wonders what real cost this has had to the environment, and to human and animal welfare. Complementing Pilcher’s assessment, Daniel Block, in his chapter on food systems (chapter 2), details the rise and triumph of the modern food system in the United States and globally. After first defining *food system* and discussing the history of the concept, Block outlines the three major food regimes, resulting in the rise and triumph of the modern food system with its concentration of processing and markets, and the ensuing vulnerabilities of the food system. Peter Atkins, in chapter 3, details food security, safety, and crises in the modern era. Employing a variety of tropes to assess the causes and effects of hunger and famine, and possible solutions, Atkins articulates and sheds light on the complexities of hunger and food security in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In chapter 4, Maya Joseph and Marion Nestle examine the complexities of food and politics. The politics of food, they argue convincingly, is everywhere and in everything—and it invariably boils down to economics. Where there is money to be made, politics enters in, and what gets regulated, what is deemed safe, what is fair, or judged as unfair, is the result of competing interests vying for economic and political advantage. Some of this is played out on the national stage, as they demonstrate with U.S. food policy; others are global in effect, as in food and the international NAFTA, GATT, and WTO agreements.

While chapters 1 through 4 focus more on issues of production, chapters 5 through 7 centre around consumption of food in the modern era. What is *eating out* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, asks Phyllis Ferguson in chapter 5? Assuming a structural approach to the topic, Ferguson notes that whereas in previous eras there existed clearer demarcations between domestic meals and meals outside the home, in the modern era those boundaries have softened considerably. Similarly, as rules and structures for fancy dining have relaxed, Ferguson observes, there exists greater space
for informality in restaurant dining. In chapter 6, Amy Trubek analyses professional cooking, kitchens, and service work in the food industry. Focusing on gender (shifting gender roles and cooking), trends in organized cooking practices (fewer domestic servants, an increase in service workers in professional kitchens), and changing forms and contents of disseminating culinary knowledge (apprenticeship versus culinary school), Trubek traces the history of professional kitchen work in the twentieth century. As she surveys these changes through time, Trubek speculates as to whether a resurgence in interest and emphasis on cooking, such as through the efforts of British chef Jamie Oliver, will reverse these trends and invigorate home cooking. Similarly, asks Alice Julier in chapter 7, how have changes in social and familial relations, combined with changes in the workforce and economic structures changed food at home? Julier describes the structural changes in economics and in the paid workforce, which have a bearing on men’s and women’s domestic work, especially regarding food procurement and preparation. Further, as families change, notes Julier, and family rhythms of home, school, and work change, so do family meals and the food work of feeding the family. Highlighting such phenomena as the rise of suburbia and the globalization of work and consumption, Julier ultimately concludes that because of the 24/7 nature of today’s work obligations, the “family meal is disrupted by global capitalism.”

Taking a more emblematic turn, chapters 8 and 9 examine representations of food and the body in modern culture. How might the body be nourished toward loftier, more soulful goals? Warren Belasco asks this in chapter 8, as he explores the landscape of body and soul in the modern era. Seeing twentieth-century food culture as embodied through four tropes (the efficient body, the authentic body, the busy body, and the responsible body), Belasco maps out the moral vicissitudes evident in a world with so much food, yet still replete with problems that require thought and action. Signe Rousseau, in chapter 9, explores the wealth of visual representations of food in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The era is rich with food media: books, television, art, online digital works, memoirs, cookbooks, coupled with an “increasingly ambiguous line between public and private” as in “food porn,” cooking shows, eating contests, and other food spectacles, and the phenomenon of the celebrity chef. What the future holds, surmises Rousseau, is uncertain, except for one thing: “people will
continue to tell stories about—and through—food, because it is a natural conduit for thinking about and negotiating life."

Finally, Fabio Parasecoli, in chapter 10, rounds out the volume by highlighting events and trends in the non-Western world that may not have been covered in the previous chapters: imperialism and war, post-World War II reconstruction and de-colonialization, simultaneous trends toward collectivization in some countries and modernization in others, and current trends such as the development of food- and agriculture-based tourism in countries in the Global South. Taken together, the chapters provide a window into the story of food in the modern era.