

A french-fry culture

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal. By Eric Schlosser. Houghton Mifflin, 342 pp., \$25.00.

In these troubling days, Americans are asking important questions about how we are perceived around the world. What draws people to risk their lives in leaking boats to get into our country? What causes others to hijack our airplanes and destroy lives? What defines the image of the U.S. abroad? As we wrestle with international affairs and issues of diplomacy, Eric Schlosser's provocative book suggests that what really shapes the American image around the world is our greasy hamburgers, fried chicken and syrupy sodas. McDonalds is the largest owner of retail property on the globe, and this investigative journalist surmises that their golden arches are now more recognizable than the Christian cross.

In 1994, a Kentucky Fried Chicken opened in Saudi Arabia's holy city, Mecca, and earned \$200,000 in a single week during Ramadan. In a study on the effects of advertising that targets children, youngsters at a primary school in Beijing all recognized an image of Ronald McDonald, saying that they liked "Uncle McDonald" because he was "funny, gentle, kind and he understood children's hearts." In 1994, a banner at Beijing University read, "Resist America beginning with Cola. Attack McDonald's. Storm KFC." Bombs have destroyed McDonald's all over the world, from St Petersburg, Russia, to Cape Town, South Africa.

In a fascinating cultural critique, Schlosser examines America through the lens of fast food, which he sees as both a commodity and a metaphor. Could our nation's character be summed up by our diet? Schlosser suggests it can, showing the ways in which the fast food industry has contributed to everything from increased obesity, to consolidation in the meatpacking industry, to the demise of the family farm and the rise of agribusiness. Today, there are more prison inmates in the United States than there are farmers. While an educated elite may eschew fast food and even ignore it, we are all shaped by this industry whether we indulge in those French fries or not.

And indulge we do. The typical American consumes three hamburgers and four orders of French fries a week. Americans spend more of their dollars on fast food than on higher education, computers or cars. Apparently, human eating habits have changed more in the past 40 years than in the previous 40,000. Ninety percent of the money Americans spend to eat goes to processed food. And as American eating habits spread throughout the world, so do our health problems; more Japanese men now are overweight than ever before.

Yet fast food has shaped more than our girths. It also shapes our economy. One in eight American workers has held a job at McDonalds at some point in her life. These low-pay, nonbenefit jobs depend upon a transitory workforce, often made up of teens. It is common practice for teens to work far more than the legal limit of three hours per school day. Of these often-untrained teens, 200,000 are injured every year through slips, falls, strains and burns. Most teens say they enjoy working in fast food. Most are trying to buy their first cars. Those cars will help them navigate the suburban sprawl that fast food helped create.

The title of the 38th annual Multi-Unit Foodserver Operators Conference in Los Angeles was "People: The Single Point of Difference." The main conversation in the convention halls was about how to attract low-wage workers when the nation's unemployment rate was at a then 24-year low. The speech that suggested coming up with new labor policies that would foster long-term careers in food service was greeted with polite applause. Much more popular were the ideas of the president of Tricon Global Restaurants, who inspires workers at his 30,000 Pizza Hut, KFC and Taco Bell restaurants with plastic chili peppers and rubber chickens. Later, Norman Brinker, the president of Bennigan's and Chili's, told the group that the thought of unions "chilled" him, and asked that the audience give more money to the industry's key lobbying groups. "And Senator Kennedy's pushing hard on a \$7.25 minimum wage," Brinker said. "That'll be fun, won't it? I love the idea of that. I sure do--strike me dead!"

Fast Food Nation spends many pages describing how the American chicken and meat industries are controlled by the enormous fast food market. The workers who butcher the meat fare worse than the ones who cook it. Schlosser reports on the monetary value assigned to lost limbs and fingers, and the pressure in these jobs not to report injuries at all, especially among immigrant workers. "Serious permanent disfigurement about the head, face or parts of the body normally exposed to public view" entitles you to a maximum \$2,000 in workers comp.

Most chilling is the description of the deliberate slowing-down in beef butchering plants on the days when they prepare meat that is going to be exported to the European Union. Apparently, across the Atlantic Ocean, they like their meat a little more carefully inspected for E. coli than the standard we accept.

It's enough to steer you away from beef and turn you into a French fry goblin. But those who indulge in French fries may be interested to know that their flavor comes from chemically standardized potatoes, grown around the world to McDonald's specifications, frozen and then fried, up until 1990, in beef tallow. That gave the French fries more saturated beef fat per ounce than a hamburger. After protests, McDonalds switched to frying in vegetable oil and produced the beef tallow flavor through the miracles of modern flavor science.

Americans eat fast food mindlessly, scarfing down a burger in their cars, or feeding children in a hurry between soccer practice and ballet. Schlosser wants us to think about those decisions. "I've written this book out of a belief that people should know what lies behind the shiny, happy surface of every fast food transaction. They should know what really lurks between those sesame seed buns. As the old saying goes: you are what you eat."

To Christians, the words "You are what you eat" have added meaning, since our central act of worship gathers us around a table. We also follow a man famous for angering the wealthy by eating at the tables of the poor. Christians who read *Fast Food Nation* will be challenged to consider the plight of workers, as our nation moves from a manufacturing to a service economy. Do all these service jobs have to be low paying, or could we envision a world in which food service workers get more than the crumbs from the table?

Christians might also examine the American obsession with foods that do not really nourish the body. Are we trying to fill a spiritual emptiness with empty calories?

As the fattest nation on earth continues its attack on one of the skinniest, *Fast Food Nation* gives us food for thought.