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978-0-521-06494-1 - Hard to Swallow: A Brief History of Food

Richard W. Lacey

Frontmatter

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Richard Lacey is Professor of Clinical Microbiology at Leeds University. He was educated at Jesus College, Cambridge, taking a first degree in medicine, before turning to clinical microbiology with a Ph.D. from the faculty of medicine at the University of Bristol.

He acts as a consultant to the World Health Organization and was advisor to the EEC 'Flair' project on Food Safety Research Grants in 1990. He was also a member of the Veterinary Products Committee in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food from 1986 to 1989.

He has received numerous awards, including the Evian Health Prize for Medicine, the Caroline Walker Award for Science, and an award from the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

He has given over 150 television interviews and 400 radio interviews worldwide, and was a columnist for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* for three years. He was scientific advisor to the highly acclaimed BBC food thriller, *Natural Lies*, in 1992.

You are what you eat – or are you?

What is in food? Where does it come from?

Richard Lacey takes the reader on a culinary exploration into the world of food. Blending science and humour, he stimulates us to question the future and to think about the nature of what we eat and where it comes from. Richard Lacey is on the side of the consumer, you and me, as he reveals the sinister side of food production and the dangers lurking in the kitchen.

The reader is served up with a feast of practical tips on the handling of food.

But food is FUN too! Our taste buds work overtime as we are shown how to enjoy food that is delicious, healthy and safe.

The overall message is: enjoy your food but be aware of the dangers and take care. As you read you will laugh, wince and learn about FOOD.

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To my Mother and Father

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Preface

At this stage, I will resist the temptation of presenting a potted précis of each chapter; nor will I summarise all the main conclusions. But I will explain what I have tried to do – that is, provide the essential facts on food; and the central purpose of each chapter is to tell you about different aspects of what has come to be called the food chain. This is an appropriate phrase, as it suggests the possibility of a few weak links in the provision of our food.

But we will not dwell on the problems, and I hope that the section dealing with the pleasure of eating will counter the horror stories in Chapter 9.

I wrote this book because I wanted to, and I hope you do not judge it to be just another book promoting particular types of food. The environmental theme is dominant. We are simply wasting the world's resources unnecessarily on the way we produce food at present.

Thinking of a plan to put matters right produced a feeling nothing short of despair in me. If you want to stay cheerful, stop at Chapter 17, and enjoy some of my mother's favourite recipes.

Some readers might find certain sections rather flippant for a work that includes some serious scientific and medical facts. But surely there is something ridiculous about much of what – and how – we eat and drink? Hopefully, you will easily identify the light-hearted asides, whose function is intended to provoke thought more than anything.

Another purpose of this book is that it will stimulate you to question in the future what exactly you are eating – what is in it, where does it come from, what advertising slogans really mean

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and, if it is meat, how the animal was reared and slaughtered.

It is hoped that this book will appeal to some vegetarians, or to those people who have not made the decision to go all the way, because of the proposal that many of our environmental problems have been caused by our habit of eating too much meat.

This is necessarily written from my UK experience but hopefully most of the substance is also for consumption in North America; I suspect that North American readers will be appalled at the UK's food poisoning record. However, food from both sides of the Atlantic does show many features in common, and it may be rather unwise to generalise. At the time of writing, the \$64,000 questions are whether Mad Cow Disease (BSE) will disappear from the UK herds as if by magic, and whether it has already infected people. But don't let this put you off North American beef completely. However, the potential knock-on effects from this disease for world farming are very great and, however unpalatable, they must be faced with honesty.

The chapter on the ideal diet is intended to be reassuring. If you are old enough to read this, some damage to your arteries will probably already have occurred! But you can help the next generation. It is definitely not my intention to fan the flames of cholesterol-phobia now sweeping the world: quite the reverse. I have tried to present the facts relevant to cholesterol. They are sometimes contradictory and confusing. In preparing readers for these, the following summarises the position as I see it. In most people, the amount of cholesterol in the blood is not due simply to the eating of cholesterol itself, but due to diet or lifestyle. Saturated animal fats and hydrogenated oils *do* make your blood cholesterol rise. The purpose of the well-balanced diet is to stop this happening, and is positively encouraged. But a raised blood cholesterol is but one of the many consequences of certain lifestyles, and it has not been proven that attempts to lower it by, say, drugs in middle age, does much if any good for your long-term health. Claims that processed food might be beneficial because it is low in cholesterol can be completely misleading if such food is high in saturated fats or hydrogenated oils.

For most people, the message is simple. Ignore the cholesterol propaganda, don't have your blood tested for cholesterol and eat

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an enjoyable and varied diet as suggested here. The real difficulty is to get the amount of food you need right.

The text is hopefully organised in a logical way, beginning at the beginning with crops, going on to wild meat and then intensively farmed meat and salmon (you may be disturbed about this), then to the various ways we endeavour to ruin certain types of whole food by processing.

Then we touch on disasters before getting onto the serious business of eating food, and enjoying it, finally coming to the depressing end. Overall, I have tried to be fair to the food industry. Some products are excellent, others are not.

Some commentators may question the authority I have to write about a subject so important and all embracing to our society. Critics will point out that I am not a 'Food Microbiologist'. True. I am proud of this. I don't work for the food industry. But I think I have one or two tentative qualifications, such as a career in medicine with special interests in chemistry, cholesterol, children, microbiology and infective problems of food. In addition, I have been a lifelong ecologist.

I would like to thank those people or organisations mentioned in the text for permission to be so quoted and, in particular, Chris Hardisty, for her recipe for tofu, and my mother (a sprightly lady whose writing is infinitely better than her doctor son's) for the recipes in Chapter 17. Incidentally, I was brought up on these recipes, interjected between the most dreadful food at boarding school. No wonder I never wanted to return from vacations!

I would like to thank Mr. Andrew West for the drawings, which may well convey a more cogent message than the rambling text.

I should also like to thank my wife Fiona for grammatical and culinary help, and my secretary, Mrs Hilary Mobbs, who must be empowered with astrological insight to understand my writing!