

Fresh: A Perishable History by Susanne Freidberg

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At the crux of Susanne Freidberg's fascinating study on the history of freshness is the question 'what exactly *is* fresh?' In pursuit of a convincing answer to this question, the professor of geography at Dartmouth College makes use of anecdotes, colourful food ads, home economic texts, women's magazines, and cookbooks to name a few. *Fresh* presents a varied depiction of human civilization and innovation ranging from ancient Roman times to the fashionable trends of the 'locavores,' whose commitment to freshness prizes food as a seasonal pleasure. Freidberg's argument takes a journey through the textured landscapes of cultural history to uncover quirky and sometimes disturbing insights into the past lives of six common perishables: beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk, and fish. All seven chapters of Freidberg's book offer original and entertaining tales about the different foods individuals consume most often. The truth that Freidberg ultimately conveys in *Fresh* is that freshness is itself a commodity, as foods are mass produced, marketed, and chemically engineered in ways that are far from natural.

The first chapter, 'Refrigeration: Cold Revolution,' focuses on refrigeration as the invention that unites modern eating patterns by transforming freshness into coldness, and therefore keeping perishables fresh longer. Refrigerators gradually replaced ice-boxes, but the conserving powers of refrigeration did not come without its consequences; commercial activity fed into public distrust, as consumers wondered whether cold-stored perishables were really as fresh as merchants claimed. The advent of the refrigeration era introduced the concept of industrial freshness, which still masks the hours of travel and labour that attractive food labels so often conceal.

In the second chapter, 'Beef: Mobile Meat,' Freidberg relays the 'story' of beef. With reference to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* Freidberg defines the problems surrounding the Chicago meat industry at the turn

of the twentieth-century. Such disturbing depictions created the impetus for greater government involvement not only in the meat industry but also in other food industries. Advancements in transportation stretched trade lines and soon the meat market became an international one; for instance, refrigeration allowed chilled beef from the Pampas of Argentina to be shipped to America. Partnered with new improvements in steamships and railroads, refrigeration transgressed borders and seasons, and allowed for the expansion of other food markets: eggs, fruits, vegetables, milk, and fish—foods that become the topic of discussion in subsequent chapters.

Chapters three through seven weigh heavily on the conundrum surrounding nature *and* immigrant control as both become marred with the idealistic expectations of commerce. Rapidly increasing populations and the demand for convenience in the growing market-place is demonstrated in Friedberg's argument as a key factor that compelled individual farmers and the greater industry to manipulate natural environments. The concept of artificial lighting—introduced in chapter three, 'Eggs: Shell Games'—tricked chickens into thinking night was day and winter was spring in order to increase egg production. Such practices have proven ethically controversial but continue despite public defiance. Freidberg asks whether the value of freshness may always be worth the cost. Her argument gains momentum in chapter five, 'Vegetables: Hidden Labor,' when she considers how immigrant control even more than natural control, pays for freshness on a vast scale, that adding value to freshness depends on the *least* valued labour.

Throughout the length of the book, Freidberg makes note of how influential manmade intervention can be. She demonstrates that human technologies not only control nature and the work environment, but it speaks to individual consumers by capitalizing on the rising demand for freshness annexed to convenience and fashionable taste. Perhaps fruit, the subject of chapter four, 'Fruit: Ephemeral Beauty,' possesses the most fashionable history. Served as both dessert and display on the tables of Louis XIV at Versailles, fruit remains to be a sign of sophistication, and even now, modern consumers select fruit based primarily on appearance while California fruit growers like Sunkist maximize profits based on superficial tactics and labels. In chapter six, 'Milk: Border Politics,' Freidberg shows that fashionable trends correlate with trends in healthcare. With the pasteurization of milk, for instance, scientists have eradicated diseases such as typhoid while increasing

standards of hygiene. And Freidberg's final chapter, 'Fish: Wild Life,' consummates the idea that freshness is most vitally tied to wildness, to raw life. From salt-drying techniques to freezing live or dead fish, global consumers acquire preserved freshness from distant regions of the world, gaining both convenience and fine taste in the process.

Freidberg's argument remains lively but becomes scattered at times. The sweeping book-length study would have benefited from more focused discussions based on fewer examples in greater detail. Informative episodes are all too often brief encounters. Though immense in scope, the study does provide attention to foods closest to the human palate and by extension, human lives. Freidberg extends her conversation to those outside academic circles, and for this reason her efforts are commendable. She shows that 'humans' hunger for better food has inspired both creativity and courage' (283), and in so doing she inspires her readers to eat more consciously. Though *Fresh* contains more than one hundred pages of footnotes, its ambition seems more targeted toward the ambitious consumer interested in politics, biology, popular culture, nutrition, anthropology, and history.

Freidberg argues that freshness transcends time and space because it is sensitive to both. Controlling freshness often means controlling nature as well as human appetites through deceptive advertising and questionable labour techniques. The desirable quality of freshness, Freidberg argues, implies high costs—environmental, technological, ethical and social. Freidberg's book contributes to public awareness of moral problems surrounding freshness by offering a look into the complexities and evolutionary scope of commodities most individuals consume on a regular basis. As Freidberg explains, 'the provision of affordable freshness testified to a nation's progress' (8), and, therefore, freshness can be seen to offer a nation's inhabitants a degree of power that comes with added wealth and health. The six engaging narratives of familiar food staples offer a knowing glimpse into our collective diet. Overall, *Fresh* conveys the message that convenience never comes cheap, and everything has its limits.