

Fat cats in our kitchen

Fred Pearce gets a glimpse inside the secretive world of the global food industry



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- [The Guardian](#), Saturday 5 July 2008
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Eat Your Heart Out

by Felicity Lawrence
352p, Penguin, £8.99

With her last book, *Not on the Label*, the investigative journalist Felicity Lawrence turned our stomachs: many people haven't eaten the same since. Now she wants to exercise our frontal lobes by taking us on a journey to find out who decides what we eat, and how they manage to foist so much rubbish on us in the name of choice, health and, increasingly, the environment.

It is a restless snap-crackle-and-pop ride, jaunty in places, rarely preachy, always engaging. Lawrence is a guide we can trust, whether she is in the Amazon soya fields or grabbing organic tucker at the local farmers' market.

Defying the conventional boundaries of her trade, she is both sensible and readable on everything from your bodily functions to Britain's archipelago of tax havens, from American industrial history to the living conditions of Italy's migrant workers (*Médecins sans Frontières* says these conditions wouldn't be allowed in African refugee camps).

British businesses such as Tate & Lyle and Unilever feature frequently. But three American combines turn up in every chapter. Cargill, the world's largest privately owned corporation, Archer Daniels Midland and Bunge sit like giant spiders in a web, brokering grain, soya, animal feed, cocoa, biofuel, palm oil and chickens - not to mention fertiliser, seeds and cotton.

They provide the feedstock for the human race, and quality control is not their strong point. They have, for instance, transformed the fats we eat, with results we are still guessing about. The chemistry of the nerve cells in our brains - our fattiest organ, apparently - is being reconfigured by these godfathers of our industrialised diet.

Lawrence offers some good history, too. We learn how John Harvey Kellogg's evangelical obsessions with constipation and masturbation, combined with a keen

commercial eye and Uncle Sam's Marshall Plan, brought cornflakes to the masses. How margarine began as an adjunct to the soap industry, moved on to waste beef tallow, then whale blubber and the products of King Leopold's genocidal tyranny in the Congo - all thanks to the British and Dutch companies that eventually combined to form Unilever.

Then there is the story of how Kurt Berger, a British food technologist who once employed Margaret Thatcher as an ice-cream innovator, went on to persuade food manufacturers to put palm oil into almost every product you eat. Goodbye, southeast Asia's rainforests. Persuasion is the name of the game. Lawrence's dissection of the marketing of "probiotic" yoghurt drinks is superb, revealing as dodgy a wheeze for extracting maximum "added value" from milk as anything dreamed up by Kellogg.

Why do we buy this rubbish? Are we forced to? The supermarkets and food combines insist we have never had so much choice, but the trouble is that our senses of smell and taste and sight - which have evolved to allow us to decide what we eat - are being deliberately confused and titillated by modern processing and packaging.

Lawrence gives us some great journalistic set pieces. She spends a day with Cow 777, a 10,000-litres-a-year milk-making machine in the Cotswolds. She joins Polish peasant farmers waking up to the fact that joining the EU means having an American industrial pig farm in your backyard. She tours Midwestern cornfields in the wake of combine harvesters yoked one minute to the world breakfast cereal business and the next to biofuels - but always to the task of turning a cheap commodity into a high-value must-have product. She meets African migrants queuing for work in the tomato fields of southern Italy. And she joins campaigners against a giant soya shipping terminal in the Amazon that is speeding the destruction of the jungle in order to feed Europe's chickens.

I would have liked to hear more from the people in the fields of the world. The people who feed us, like the fruit farmers of Chile or the bean-growers of Kenya. Not least because one of the subtexts of a book like this is that we should go back to eating simple and eating local - and cutting these people and their products out of our lives.

But there is much to feast on as Lawrence journeys from her own fat cat (page one finds her musing on the girth of her moggy) to find the fat cats of the food business, laying bare mind-boggling madresses, such as the global pandemic of addiction - there is no other sensible world for it - to sugar.

"The genius of globalised capitalism," Lawrence concludes, "is not just to give consumers what they want, but to make them want what it has to sell." If this book has a fault it is that it does not get close enough to this genius. But sadly this is a reclusive world. Lawrence never got through the doors of Cargill, which has its European headquarters at Cobham in Surrey.

We all of us eat the products supplied by such companies every day of our lives. Most of the molecules in our bodies come from them, but they won't even talk to us about it.