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Fresh: A Perishable History



Synopsis

That rosy tomato perched on your plate in December is at the end of a great journey—not just over land and sea, but across a vast and varied cultural history. This is the territory charted in *Fresh*. Opening the door of an ordinary refrigerator, it tells the curious story of the quality stored inside: freshness. We want fresh foods to keep us healthy, and to connect us to nature and community. We also want them convenient, pretty, and cheap. *Fresh* traces our paradoxical hunger to its roots in the rise of mass consumption, when freshness seemed both proof of and an antidote to progress. Susanne Freidberg begins with refrigeration, a trend as controversial at the turn of the twentieth century as genetically modified crops are today. Consumers blamed cold storage for high prices and rotten eggs but, ultimately, aggressive marketing, advances in technology, and new ideas about health and hygiene overcame this distrust. Freidberg then takes six common foods from the refrigerator to discover what each has to say about our notions of freshness. Fruit, for instance, shows why beauty trumped taste at a surprisingly early date. In the case of fish, we see how the value of a living, quivering catch has ironically hastened the death of species. And of all supermarket staples, why has milk remained the most stubbornly local? Local livelihoods; global trade; the politics of taste, community, and environmental change: all enter into this lively, surprising, yet sobering tale about the nature and cost of our hunger for freshness.

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Customer Reviews

For most of her life, my grandmother kept her milk, eggs, and butter in the spring house on her

Missouri farm. Through the 1940s, my mother subscribed to a twice-weekly delivery of ice for her icebox, and in 1951, bought a Crosley "Shelvadore." I have a refrigerator-freezer that makes ice and dispenses cold water, and another freezer for garden vegetables and fruits. Times have changed. In *FRESH: A PERISHABLE HISTORY*, Susanne Freidberg opens the refrigerator door on a fascinating aspect of our modern American food culture: how the search for "fresh" food has shaped what we buy, cook, and eat. We take the refrigerator so much for granted that it's almost impossible to imagine what eating was like before--and what it is like now for those who can't afford to participate. But we didn't always have ice on demand and mechanical refrigeration has been around for only a century. In her first chapter, Freidberg's first chapter establishes the technical context for her discussion of the extraordinary changes that have taken place in our diets and eating habits in the last hundred years. The "cold revolution" changed the geography of fresh food, she says, making it possible for perishable foodstuffs to travel around the globe and for seasonally-available fruits, vegetables, and meat to appear on our tables year-round. Refrigeration gives us the ability to consume very old food and still happily imagine it as "fresh." Take meat, for instance. As hunters, humans have always eaten wild meat, but Freidberg points out that eating domesticated animals has been, until recently, a "seasonal and regional luxury." Most people ate plant-based diets with the occasional addition of locally grown and processed meat.

Many books can be found on the current state of our food, our attitudes toward food, our local food movement, the problems with our cheap, industrial food systems. This book is unique for its historical vantage point. And it tells a fascinating story. Two aspects of this book make it the amazing read that it is: the incredible density of information and Freidberg's clear, graceful prose. While the book is built on an impressive foundation of research, it is the prose style that keeps this information engaging from page to page. Freidberg's knack for narrative also gives the book an economy that is impressive for the amount of interconnected subjects she deals with. Each chapter (on refrigeration, beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk, and fish) tells the history of a food industry we now consider central to civilization, and answers with wide-ranging knowledge and conscience the question: how did we get here (to the world in which beef seems as plentiful as water and "baby" carrots look most natural in their see-through bags, and to the world in which our industrialized food systems are proving to be unsustainable)? Freidberg considers with equal care the roles of refrigeration and of labor inequality; the roles of marketing and of women in the workforce; the roles of technological innovation and of food fads, in her telling of this history of freshness and its consequences. As I try to list all of the subjects this concise history covers, I'm amazed by the

complexity of the story it tells with so much seeming ease. If you're interested in food, and in history, you'll find this a page-turner. As a food-focused writer and participant in our current local food movement myself, I find the historical perspective of this book especially valuable.

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