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Sorting The Beef From The Bull: The Science Of Food Fraud Forensics



Synopsis

Horsemeat in our burgers, melamine in our infants' milk, artificial colors in our fish and fruit... As our urban lifestyle takes us further and further away from our food sources, there are increasing opportunities for dishonesty, duplicity, and profit-making shortcuts. Food adulteration, motivated by money, is an issue that has spanned the globe throughout human history. Whether it's a matter of making a good quality oil stretch a bit further by adding a little extra "something" or labelling a food falsely to appeal to current consumer trends - it's all food fraud, and it costs the food industry billions of dollars each year. The price to consumers may be even higher, with some paying for these crimes with their health and, in some cases, their lives. So how do we sort the beef from the bull (or horse, as the case may be)? This audiobook explains the scientific tools and techniques that revealed the century's biggest food fraud scams. It looks in detail at the biggest scams in recent times; drawing on the lead author's extensive experience at the forefront of the fight against these fraudsters, it goes on to explore the arms race between scientists and adulterers as better techniques for detection spur more creative and sophisticated means of adulteration. Finally, it looks at the up-and-coming techniques and devices that will help the industry and consumers fight food fraud in the future. Engagingly written by Richard Evershed and Nicola Temple, this book lifts the lid on the forensics involved and brings the full story of a fascinating and underreported applied science to light.

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Customer Reviews

Sorting the Beef from the Bull: The Science of Food Fraud Forensics by Richard Evershed and Nicola Temple. London, Bloomsbury Sigma. 2016 320pp. ISBN 13-978-1472911339

The authors make clear that this is not a book about bad eating habits or the evils of corporate capitalism in terms of agribusiness. It is about covert practices that are applied to food that gainsay the label. It is mostly about how we are not necessarily buying what we intend to buy and consume. Some times our food and potables are not what they claim to be and we are cheated out of some of our money. Sometimes we are poisoned. It is about food security, an often used but typically misunderstood concept. The general public that reads this book will get a clearer understanding of that term. It is about the intentional altering of food purely for profit. They provide methods to test our purchases based on known chemistry which identifies types of structures that can only apply to certain products. It is written clearly and in a style that is readable but most of us do not have a laboratory or the scientific background to examine the contents of what we eat. Really, we are not going to do that anyway. The science that they present does appear to be pretty sound though. The appendices do provide the chemical structures for those skilled at understanding them. Their approach to getting what you pay for is very much as my own is and it comes from the food philosophy (if such a genre exists) of Michael Pollan. If you are shopping at a grocery store, as much as possible avoid the interior aisles. Stick to the periphery where the food is all less processed and in some cases not processed at all. In the typical grocery the jalapenos might have been gassed into ripeness but they at least are a product that grows in the ground. The book cites two sources of information that are open to the public and those who want can explore the details of food security practices at the Codex Alimentarius web site. There is a broader scientific site called the Barcode of Life which includes many species including edible ones. These are both information packed locations to get dirty with the science of the author's premises. They are not required reading to understanding this book however. A brief aside here. I contracted with Safeway Stores in the early 1990s to write job descriptions and many of those occurred in a regional warehouse. This is where all produce and otherwise lands prior to being distributed to local stores. I watched the process of ethylene gassing of produce in order to enhance coloration and shelf life. The gas chamber is like one imagines after seeing a movie such as I Want to Live with Susan Hayward. No one wants a leaky door here. It is better as they claim, to buy locally from farmers that one gains a rapport with. This is easily done most anywhere in America today with Farmer's Markets and roadside stands thriving. Having worked as a produce seller for several years at Farmer's Markets it became incumbent on me to know the product I was selling and to speak frankly with inquisitive customers. About half of the questions

asked were reasoned and I wanted to ensure the customer that they were being answered correctly. (The other half of the questions included the likes of “Is this a tree grown apple?”) The authors describe several foods that are prone to adulteration. Honey is a good example for starters. If you venture into middle aisle of your grocery store and select the store brand version you are likely to get a product that is a mix of many honeys all accumulated in a vast container at a warehouse and then this mixture is poured into the bottle that you will hold in your hand. The label will lack any sort of information that is useful as to the provenance of the honey. That is not fraud and there is nothing illegal with this practice nor is there anything illegal about similar practices regarding the ground meat that becomes the fast food delectable that advertisers make us want so much. The problem is when something goes wrong. The food supply chain for most processed consumables is vast. The network is diverse and each part of the processing is unique to all of the others. Specific fraud can occur a continent away from where accidental tainting happens and another continent away from the vendor or grocery store. The more complicated the system of getting from farm to table becomes, the more likely that fraud will be involved. The book describes this often and it becomes particularly concrete to the reader when the discussion was of spices. Accidental or deliberate adulteration of a product can be disastrous for consumers and financially catastrophic for the company. This is due to that expansive nature of the food chain, one encouraged by large companies. When there are too many players in the mix, a problem product goes undetected. There might not be actual fraud involved and there might. The problem is resolving the problem by finding out where it stemmed from. Of late we read and hear of the woes of the Chipotle chain that cannot be solved because of the massive number of involved farms producing food for the chain. Regardless of how the contaminated produce is involved in the process of food scandals, there often is a type of fraud involved in the laying of blame. When suppliers are numerous then all players can point a finger elsewhere. Lines such as “the buck stops here” are rarely used. Companies go out of business anyway, stock prices drop and people get sick and sometimes for the last time. The authors present that as well as so many other notions about how fraud can occur and why. Follow the money, no one needed to tell you that. If a product can be provided that is reduced in quality, how many of us really know? Are consumers experts on the quality of the extra virgin olive oil they consume? That is one example that the authors discuss and it has been in the media for several years. While I like to think I have a palate for finer foods this book convinced me that I probably really don’t. The story becomes dismal and the methods that consumers use to confirm that they are getting what they paid for so weak that it is disheartening. It is for me anyway.

So I return to what was written a few paragraphs ago. Whenever possible, buy food from farmers that you can talk to and only shop the periphery of your grocery stores if you can. As consumers we are not blameless in all of this. We have proven to the grocery business that we want specialty products and we want them at our fingertips at any time. Likewise we are artful in our pretense. We are willing to buy the olive oil that has a convincing label and we really cannot tell the difference. This lends itself to the Red Queen Affect. As consumers we demand sophistication in much of our food and frauds are prepared to give us what they imagine, that we need to satisfy our tastes. There are taste experts and they are rarely us. Our vanity drives us to discuss the provenance of some food based on a fraudulent description on a label. It makes for interesting dinner conversation. These good ideas really only apply to those who can do that. I can drive to someplace where I can improve my chances of getting good food. Many people cannot. It is those most burdened by lack of resources that are most likely to be buying food that could be most anything. Years ago I found a can of "potted meat product" at a suburban grocery store. It cost about 45 cents and the label told the reader of all things involved in this product they dared not call meat. I bought it, not to eat but to display on my ledge of hard to believe products that I collect and are designed to be eaten by poor people. Another quick aside. Campbell's has cans of broth amongst their many products. Nothing wrong with that though maybe an examination of the contents is worthwhile. I have no beef with Campbell's (heh-heh) but on a can of yes, beef broth the label declares that it is "Great for Cooking". I have a can in my collection. Had they not pronounced a use for this product I may have washed my hair with it. So in general I thought this to be an informative work but one that left me feeling pretty cold about my prospects of getting what I pay for. It is hard to be enthusiastic about what is sold for food these days. The consumer who is diligent in their choices is still stuck with the prospects of what is actually involved in what they are eating. I also was left disappointed about their lack of discussion about the Nestles fraud in their tainted baby formula sold in third world nations some 20 years ago. The only mention of that company was a short tribute to something ethical they did, it was a tribute albeit brief

Interesting book. I got bogged down with all of the chemical references, but I have a little difficulty with technical descriptions. I ended up skipping over those parts. But the other information is really eye-opening. It certainly makes me read labels more and pay attention to what's in season. Without the chemistry...5 stars.

Great book. Reminds me of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Let's hope it has as much impact as *The Jungle*.

Informative. Easy to understand.

In a book with such a catchy title, one would expect a certain element of tongue-in-cheek flavor to its prose. Well, although a few very clever and occasionally humorous passages can be found, this book is extremely serious about very troubling activities happening worldwide in the food industry – food fraud. Essentially, this is advertising some food as one thing when in fact, it is either clandestinely mixed with something else or is something else entirely. And this something else is much cheaper and often dangerous to human health. The book's authors, both scientists, explain what is being done to find food fraud through various scientific testing methods as well as how countries/organizations are trying to at least discourage it from happening. The foods that are focused on include: honey, vegetable oils, fish, chicken, beef, milk, spices, fruits and vegetables, beverages and more. Guidelines are also given to help the reader minimize exposure to food fraud. I found this authoritative book to be very well written in a clear, lively, mostly accessible and engaging prose. Several organic molecules are mentioned as are some of the dynamics of chemical reactions. Some of the passages containing these may be more easily grasped by science enthusiasts than the average general reader. But these passages are relatively minor in comparison to the book's main message. And I also found the stories recounted to be immensely captivating.

"Sorting the Beef from the Bull" describes various types of food fraud and what scientists and consumers can do about it. While there is some "science talk" when describing how food fraud can be detected, the authors did a good job of explaining those tests in a way that non-scientists can follow. If you can follow a CSI-type show, then you can follow this book. The authors started by giving an overview of food adulteration, then they described the origins of food fraud detection and compared it to what's currently being done about it. Next they looked at specific categories of food and described past methods of adulteration, what scientists can do to detect that adulteration, and what the consumer can do to avoid it. The categories they covered were vegetable oil (including rapeseed, maize, and olive oil); fish; beef; milk, butter, and cheese; spices (including pepper, paprika, cayenne, chillies, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, ginger, nutmeg, saffron, salt, turmeric, and vanilla); beverages (including juice and wine); and whole fruits, vegetables, grains, and seeds. The

cases came from all over the world, but they mainly looked at cases in the UK, USA, and China. I appreciate that the authors gave advice on how the average consumer can try to avoid or detect adulterated products. I'm glad I'm informed now, and I'd recommend this book to anyone who wants to know more about food fraud. I received an ebook review copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley.

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