FAT AND UNHAPPY

Book review by Michele Simon

FAT LAND
How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World
By Greg Critser
232 pp. Boston
Houghton Mifflin Company. $24

As a nutrition advocate, I probably spend more time than the average person staying on top of the latest reports about food and nutrition. So when a book claiming to explain “how Americans became the fattest people in the world” came along, I was quite eager to see what journalist Greg Critser had to say.

Fat Land starts out promisingly, presenting much fascinating and often surprising information. However, in the end, it left me unsatisfied, a little annoyed, and ultimately disappointed that the subtitle’s promise was never quite fulfilled.

But I am getting ahead of myself. First let me tell you what I liked about Fat Land: For one, its analysis of how the widespread use of the sweetener, high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and the “super-sizing” of fast food have contributed to the nation’s soaring rates of obesity and diabetes.

If you look at the list of ingredients in most soft drinks and processed foods these days, often the very first one is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS in food industry lingo), a byproduct of corn production. Generous federal subsidies to corn growers, such as those passed in last year’s national Farm Bill, have dramatically lowered the cost of HFCS, making it extremely attractive to food makers.

The shift from pricier sugar to dirt-cheap HFCS has helped to create an explosion of low-cost snack foods that began in the 1970s and continues today. It has also turned the super-sizing of sodas and other nutritionally deficient junk foods into an extremely profitable marketing scheme, as adding more HFCS costs manufacturers mere pennies.

Critser notes that HFCS consumption now constitutes nine percent of the average individual’s daily energy intake (and up to 20 percent of the average child’s diet). This has prompted scientists to examine whether increased HFCS intake itself may have led to elevated rates of obesity, not merely through increased calories, but through a variety of complex chemical reactions it stimulates in the human body.

One recent study concluded that consumption of HFCS-sweetened continued on next page
drinks is associated with obesity in children.

Perhaps the most frightening thing about HFCS is what’s unknown about it. HFCS is essentially an experimental chemical not found in nature that has been unleashed into the food supply without sufficient knowledge of its safety. Exactly why our nutrition policymakers have been largely uninterested in taking a closer look at the potential dangers is one of many questions raised, but left unanswered, by *Fat Land*.

Critser is also at his most insightful when he takes on the media and exposes the nutrition misinformation they’ve perpetuated over the years. For example, he explains how the national weight control guidelines have been influenced by food industry scientists and pressure groups eager to massage the data to assure more relaxed standards. Not surprisingly, the American press has tended to accept official pronouncements about the weight guidelines at face value, giving little thought to the politics behind them.

Much has been made of Critser’s impeccable scientific reporting and yes, he does offer impressive, extremely detailed descriptions — for example, of exactly how diabetes takes it toll on the body. Interesting but not very useful, I’m afraid.

Critser’s discussion of the relationship between poverty and diet-related health problems is also disappointing. While he offers lots of disturbing statistics showing how the incidence of obesity and other disorders is disproportionately higher among low-income communities, he fails to attribute this problem to the poor’s lack of access to healthy food. Instead, he seems to think that if only poor people could afford a gym membership, they too could lose weight just like he did.

Indeed, at times Critser seems intent on chalkling up the nation’s ever-widening girth to declining levels of physical activity alone. He spends much time talking about the lowering of standards for physical education in public schools. In looking for a model exercise program, the best idea he can find is one that combines video games and exercise bikes. But how many school districts can afford that? And what happens when the kids are away from school? Where and how will they get their exercise?

In the end, a lack of viable solutions is the biggest letdown of Critser’s book. For example, while he is right to point to the decline in physical activity as a major cause of health problems among Americans, this emphasis results in recommendations that sound a little too much like the “personal responsibility” mantra favored by food industry executives and conservative politicians. In fact, quite surprisingly, given his professed sensitivity to the connection between poverty and health, Critser actually ends the book with this empty prescription: “How we get out of that hell depends not upon prayer, but rather upon a new sense of collective will — and individual willpower.”

Some reviewers have favorably compared *Fat Land* to Eric Schlosser’s best-selling *Fast Food Nation*. However, Critser’s writing does not measure up to the high standards of investigative journalism that mark Schlosser’s chilling exposé of a greedy industry. Nor does it approach the level of academic scholarship found in Marion Nestle’s recent book, *Food Politics*. Both *Fast Food Nation* and *Food Politics* are far more
illuminating accounts of how we got into the mess we’re in now, and also offer some solutions. I got the sense that Critser wrote *Fat Land* not to change the world, but rather to satisfy his own curiosity. Thus, we’re treated to somewhat random, albeit entertaining, tales of research politics, in-depth nutrition science reporting, and miscellaneous social commentary, the sum of which never quite adds up to much more than a good read.

Unlike *Fat Land*, books like *Fast Food Nation* and *Food Politics* lay the blame squarely where it belongs: at the feet of a mighty food industry that peddles junk food by the truckload to a nation whose knowledge of nutrition has been largely shaped by these very marketers. And while Critser does call some attention to controversial policies such as school soda contracts, he is clearly not interested in providing a comprehensive analysis of Big Food’s enormous leverage over government nutrition policy. In short, what’s missing from Critser’s book is a more complete account of just how America has become the fattest nation on the planet, along with viable proposals for fixing this problem.

Some might argue that my standards are too high and that for someone new to the issue, *Fat Land* has plenty to offer. That may be true. For those who know very little about this topic, I’d say, sure, you’ve got nothing to lose by reading it. But if you’re interested in getting a more well-rounded picture, just don’t make it the only resource you consult. If you already consider yourself something of an expert, then *Fat Land* is still worth a skim for material that might be new to you. Just don’t expect too many answers.

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This is Your Food on Drugs

So proclaimed a banner unfurled by Greenpeace campaigners last fall. The activists were in Aurora, Nebraska, to draw attention to a warehouse filled with 500,000 bushels of food-grade soybeans that had been contaminated with remnants of “pharmaceutical” corn produced with seeds from ProdiGene, a Texas biotech company. According to John Nichols, Washington correspondent for The Nation, the events leading up to the discovery of the tainted food cache had all the hallmarks of a “dystopian science fiction story.”

Nichols’ illuminating and chilling account, published in The Nation’s December 30, 2002 issue, begins in Hamilton County, Nebraska, where a local farmer had quietly planted a test plot of ProdiGene seeds genetically engineered to produce corn containing potent drugs for the treatment of diarrhea in pigs. Later that year, he harvested soybeans for human consumption from the same field and shipped them off to the Aurora warehouse, where they commingled with other soybeans destined for America’s food markets. And that’s exactly where they would have wound up were it not for a fortuitous routine inspection by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The agency, says Nichols, found that “corn plants that should have been completely removed were still growing in the field from which the soybeans had been harvested — raising the prospect that the pharmaceutical crop had mingled with the food crop.”

The discovery led USDA investigators to order the lockdown of the Aurora warehouse, and prompted Greenpeace and other agribusiness watchdogs to sound the alarm about the perils of biopharming. Nichols quotes Mark Ritchie, president of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, who declared the Aurora incident the Three Mile Island of biotech. “We’re at the earliest stage of the attempt to genetically engineer corn plants to make them factories for producing powerful and potentially dangerous drugs, and already we have examples of contamination of food crops. This is scary stuff.”

Soon, says Nichols, plants that have been genetically engineered to generate everything from AIDS vaccines to blood-clotting agents to digestive enzymes to industrial adhesives could routinely find their way onto the nation’s dinner plates. While the prospect of a food supply on drugs has environmentalists more than a little concerned, the biotech industry is salivating over the idea of a biopharmed future. Biopharmaceutical firms would like the public to believe that their desire to produce drug-laden food crops springs from purely humanitarian impulses, but critics point to a more likely motive: huge profits. Bill Freese, a policy analyst with Friends of the Earth, maintains that companies like ProdiGene, Monsanto, and Dow Chemical “talk a great deal about the benefits for society. But it’s really the economics that attract them. They think they can grow drugs more cheaply and have lower production costs than if they were produced in factories.”

Luckily for them, the Bush White House and the Republican-controlled Congress have no plans to hinder their agenda; in fact, observes Nichols, when it comes to biopharming, they have consistently favored internal “voluntary” regulation over external rules. Thanks to this hands-off policy, industry should have an easy time replacing expensive pharmaceutical laboratories and factories with hundreds of thousands of acres dedicated to pharmaceutical corn and soybeans. While the agri-pharmaceutical companies stand to be rewarded with handsome multibillion-dollar returns, unwitting consumers of drug-laced foods may not fare as well.
Please, Stop the Murky Yogurt!

The food science wizards at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have discovered a technique that would “stop consumers from finding that murky liquid at the surface of their yogurt.” To combat this pesky problem, commercial yogurt makers typically add stabilizers and pectin to decrease the whey content. The new, improved method involves simply lowering the temperature during the fermentation process, which apparently creates fewer surface “defects.” It’s comforting to know that our best and brightest scientific minds are gainfully employed.

Source: Just-food.com, 2/21/03

Snack Attack for Cows

In an effort to save on rising feed costs, cows in Pennsylvania are being fed a steady diet of potato chips, cheese curls, and pretzels. Industry experts say that feeding livestock discarded human food saves money and helps the environment. And hey, the cows are eating locally. Hawaiian cattle get processed pineapple scraps, Kansas heifers feast on sunflower seed hulls, and Nebraska and California cows eat sugar beet pulp. Farmer Dwight Hess feeds his cattle cereals from a local Kellogg’s plant in Pennsylvania, in addition to chocolate and peanut butter for the fat and protein. “It’s senseless, putting a very high-quality, human-grade food product into a landfill,” he said. “We’re producing a premium product and I’m proud of what we do.” Does he sound a tad defensive?

Source: Associated Press, 2/3/03

From the Wacky World of Big Food

Sushi-Flavored Coffee?

A quiet revolution is under way in the world of flavor research, blending chemistry, molecular biology, and genetics to trick your brain into believing you’re eating something you’re not. The New Jersey-based Linguagen Corporation has received a U.S. patent for the first chemical known to inhibit the taste of bitterness by altering human perception, instead of flavor. But before creating a world where broccoli tastes like chocolate, researchers still have a few kinks to work out. Apparently, adding too much of the chemical to coffee has one minor drawback: it generates the taste of raw fish in your mouth.

Source: The Globe and Mail, 2/1/03

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Beef Too Cool for Teens

In a move sure to make vegetarian advocates proud of their influence, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association has responded to the growing popular-

Crazy New Way to Push Milk

Moo-ve over e-Moo and Milk Chugs. The clever beverage industry’s latest attempt to jump on the “milk is cool” bandwagon comes in the form of carbonated milk drinks called Crazy Cow Sparkling Milk. Brought to you by Cadbury Schweppes, no stranger to the world of bubbly canned sodas, the manufacturer calls its new product “a refreshing fat free effervescent beverage that is a healthy alternative to soda.” Targeted to children, (surprise!) it comes in “energy cans with cow related fun graphics” and is “available in three exciting flavors, Lemon-Vanilla Ice, Strawberry Chill, and Orange Cream.” And as if that weren’t enough, Crazy Cow Sparkling Milk is currently the only shelf stable carbonated milk drink in the nation! Too bad the health consequences of drinking sugar-laden cow’s milk are nothing to celebrate.

Source: Cadbury Schweppes Press Release, 02/05/03

Next Case: YouGottaEat v. You Gotta Eat

In a legal battle destined for Supreme Court review, Tampa-based Checkers Drive-In Restaurants is being sued over its “You Gotta Eat” advertising campaign by New York–based YouGottaEat, Inc., owner of a Web site that offers discounts at various Manhattan eateries. You see, the guide YouGottaEat is upset because it owns the U.S. trademark for the three words without spaces in between them. But the hamburger chain wants to trademark its campaign, which uses spaces between the words. According to Checkers, YouGottaEat asked for a substantial amount to avoid legal action; naturally. Given that marketing messages encouraging people to eat more are partly to blame for America’s rising obesity epidemic, they’ve both gotta lotta nerve.

Source: St. Petersburg Times, 2/21/03

Uncle Sam’s Sweet Tooth

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced in January that it’s selling remaining government sugar supplies and increasing allotments to boost the domestic sugar supply. (Who knew we had a sugar shortage?) The USDA said it would immediately put around 185,000 short tons of federal sugar supplies up for sale. According to the American Sugar Alliance, the government could make a big profit from the sale. Gee, wonder where those extra dollars will go: nutrition education or military-industrial complex?

Source: Just-food.com, 1/13/03
The New York Times recently ran a revealing and disquieting article about injured Central American banana workers who have taken the giants of the chemical and fruit industries to court, only to be frustrated by the slippery legal tactics employed by those corporations. The January 18, 2003 piece noted that the workers are attempting to sue companies like Shell Oil, Dow Chemical, Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita over injuries they say they sustained after working in and around the pesticide DBCP. The compound was banned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1979, after it was found to cause sterility and an increased risk of cancer and genetic damage in humans.

The banana workers have been trying to win compensation from fruit growers and chemical manufacturers for harm caused by DBCP exposure — including sterility, cancer, and birth defects in children — for the last two decades. Until recently, their efforts have been confined to jurisdictions outside the U.S., where the accused companies have been largely successful at absolving themselves of any liability. However, in January a ruling by a federal judge in New Orleans paved the way for 3,000 Central American banana workers to file a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against banana growers and DBCP manufacturers, making it the first such case to be tried in the U.S. Also in January, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on whether or not other DBCP lawsuits should go forward in state courts.

The American lawsuits accuse DBCP makers of shipping their product to foreign banana plantations, where employers often allowed farm laborers to use it without the benefit of proper protective gear or warnings about its dangers. They also charge that the corporations were aware of DBCP’s harmful effects for years — even before the 1979 U.S. ban — and that some fruit companies were using it as late as 1985.

Similar legal initiatives undertaken outside the U.S. have been readily fended off by corporate defendants. Taking advantage of the antiquated legal structures in many Central American countries, which are not set up to handle extremely technical class-action cases involving thousands of plaintiffs, corporate lawyers have succeeded in getting many of the cases dismissed, or have settled them for puny sums. In a 1997
judgment, for example, 26,000 former banana workers exposed to DBCP in Central America, Africa, and the Philippines went home with an average of $1,500 each. A 1992 settlement in Costa Rica awarded an anemic $20 million to 1,000 workers.

Bucking this trend, Nicaraguan courts have recently begun granting hundreds of millions of dollars in damages to banana workers, largely as a result of a law passed in 2000 that has made it easier for DBCP victims to file claims. The law has been vociferously attacked by the Bush State Department, which has deemed it a hindrance to foreign investment in the country. Nevertheless, in January a Managua court ordered Shell, Dole, and Dow to pay $489.4 million to 450 injured banana workers. The companies declined to participate in the trial and refused to pay, arguing that Nicaraguan courts have no jurisdiction over U.S.-based firms.

If the American DBCP lawsuits go forward, corporate attorneys are likely to turn this argument on its head and claim that domestic courts cannot hold U.S. companies accountable for alleged actions abroad. Tragically, all of this convoluted legal maneuvering is likely to keep the bank accounts of huge chemical and agribusiness conglomerates well padded while denying just compensation to workers who have suffered terribly at the hands of a recklessly used carcinogenic and mutagenic pesticide.