Blame It on the Grain

An Edible History of Humanity
Tom Standage
New York: Walker and Company, 2009
xii + 260 pp. $26.00 (paper)

Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives
Carolyn Steel
London: Chatto & Windus, 2008
xiv + 386 pp. Illustrations. £12.99 (paper)

If you're an urban dweller who finds it increasingly difficult to deal with crowds, traffic, noise, the lack of green, the buildings shutting out the sun—blame it on corn, says Carolyn Steel, author of *Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives*. Tom Standage, in his *An Edible History of Humanity*, states that "wheat or barley" is more likely the culprit. Both agree that the cultivation of grain—the specific variety most likely dependent on whatever wild cereal crop was indigenous to a given region—was truly the "seed" of civilization.

Both Steel and Standage outline a similar scenario for the beginning of urbanization vis-à-vis the birth of agriculture. Until roughly twelve thousand years ago when the last ice age retreated, our ancestors were hunter-gatherers, nomads following the grazing patterns of wild herds. However, increasing human populations and a northern movement of the animals, plus incredibly rich and fertile lands resulting from the ice's retreat, may have encouraged our ancient relatives to experiment with settling down: dropping seed, waiting, harvesting, and eventually grazing animals once the crops took. This was not an easy transition, and the difficulty went further than the trial-and-error domestication of plants to ensure yields. Even as hunting became more difficult and tribal organization more complex, the idea of eating grasses—the food of their prey—must have seemed abhorrent, an act forced by the threat of starvation.

Still, gradually, and proving the adaptability of humans, our early relatives became farmers. And so, note both authors, while today there is a huge disconnect between urban and rural worlds, the first "cities" grew from agricultural establishments, successfully undertaking the job of feeding inhabitants until massive growth, population increases (largely the result of a reliable supply of sustenance), and industrialization lessened the priority given to farming and pushed the work of growing food further and further outside the boundaries of the city limits, eventually transforming city dwellers into pure consumers.

This is where the similarities between the two books end. Standage's *An Edible History of Humanity* is a linear cataloging of pure fact, written mainly for social historians and others fascinated by dates, figures, and hardcore details. Tom Standage is business affairs editor at *The Economist*, where he oversees the magazine's business, finance, science, and technology coverage, and the author of five history books, including *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (2005), a *New York Times* bestseller. He holds a degree in engineering and computer science from Oxford University—which shows in his writing style: slightly dry, somewhat academic, with very little subjective commentary beyond what, when, where, and why something was relevant to what would come next. This is an observation, not a criticism. *An Edible History of Humanity* is all-encompassing, moving fluidly from one civilization to another, imparting the author's considerable knowledge to portray significant links between the growing and supplying of food and the world's major economic, social, and political events.

Despite the dryness of Standage's style, there are wonderful epiphanies within *An Edible History of Humanity*. The author's work on the evolution of the potato is fascinating, from the uphill fight to get nearly starving Europeans to eat this unsightly tuber, originally thought to be poisonous, to the potato's role in saving the Irish from starvation. Standage notes how the failure of the potato crop and subsequent famine triggered waves of immigration and the

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building of North American cities as Irish immigrants left the isle in droves, spurred by the threat of hunger.

If Standage's aim is to tell us what our relationship with food has been, then Carolyn Steel's is to tell us what went wrong and who is to blame. Her *Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives* is far less linear and much more thematic; her focus on the relationship between food and cities—for the most part, London— is far more limited than Standage's broader world view. Beginning with a disturbing vision of modern-day food production—vegetarians would do best to avoid these early pages—Steel has organized her book into seven focus areas: The Land, Supplying the City, Market and Supermarket, The Kitchen, At Table, Waste, and Sitopia. Her basic premise is that as cities have moved toward industrialization and further from their initial role as a place of food production, city dwellers have developed a far less intimate and much more strained relationship with what they eat.

The first two sections delve into many of the points that arise in Standage's work: how cities were established and grew around the need to grow food and raise animals. But soon Steel begins to lace her writing with a political undercurrent that often builds into uncomfortable preachiness. In "Market and Supermarket" she lauds Faneuil Hall Marketplace in London for its return to the roots of the city market and traces the evolution of the market to the supermarket, rounding up the usual culprits: the growth of the suburbs and the two-car family. Highly critical of the disconnect from the source of our food brought about by the big-box supermarket, she faults the "ready meal" ("takeout" in American parlance and "home meal replacement" in the retail food trade). In fact, Steel aims much of the blame for most current culinary evils—fat, salt, overprocessing—squarely on the shoulders of Tesco, the British equivalent of Costco (much of *Hungry City* is limited to British organizations, statistics, and food customs). A quick trip to the Tesco Web site shows a number of service articles dealing with fresh foods and some relatively wholesome recipes for a fresh fruit charlotte and a spicy prawn dish. Their intent is to educate their customers on preparing decent meals at a reasonable cost (using their products, of course, which is a fully legitimate marketing approach for food retailers).

There is no denying the widespread problems created by too much overprocessed, fatty food—but surely the individuals consuming these meals have to be charged with some shred of personal responsibility. Today, thanks to modern communications, more people have greater access to information about food and why processing, trans fat, and other offending substances should be avoided. There are literally hundreds of thousands of Web sites, periodicals, and books, as well as countless campaigns on the benefits of simple, wholesome, and, if possible, local foods. Despite all this information, obesity, heart disease, and diet-related cancers are on the rise. So it seems unfairly one-sided to lay the blame solely on corporations offering "bad" foods for sale. Despite knowing better, some individuals simply make unhealthy choices. It is human nature to crave what we shouldn't have.

This is not to say that *Hungry City* isn't a worthy read. Steel's study on the evolution of the kitchen, from a hovel separate from the main house to an open-concept showpiece where food seems strangely out of place, is witty and quite telling of our evolution as consumers. So is the "At Table" section, which deals with the growing alignment of food, social customs, and one's station in life. Particularly gripping is Steel's look at how we moved from whole suckling pigs and other meats complete with feathers and furs to a food esthetic that causes meat to be served without any semblance to its animal origins.

"Waste" looks not only at mounting garbage from an ecological perspective but also at the amount of food that we as a society throw away—roughly a third of what we buy. Finally, Sitopia looks at futuristic utopias created with the goal of restoring the city's ability to grow and provide food for its inhabitants. There is something faintly akin to science fiction to this section, and Steel soft-peddles the suggestion that perhaps humans are not smart or conscientious or ambitious enough to pull this technology off, that we are incapable of redeeming ourselves through hydroponic tomatoes and whole grains. Her scenarios offer up a prescribed and politically correct future in which we spend most of our time raising pigs in high-rises and tending perfect urban gardens. With all this effort to feed ourselves, where do we find the time to invent, create, discover, do what needs to be done to make our civilization progress? As it was for our hunter-gather ancestors, our waking hours would be consumed with our food supply. But perhaps that's the point.

Carolyn Steel is a passionate writer, a forceful storyteller, and an even more forceful lobbyist. Her fast, fact-filled, emotion-laden prose pleads with us to stop hurling ourselves toward a foodless urban future. But *Hungry City* feels too much like the work of a modern-day pamphleteer to be truly effective. What is missing is the understanding that we as individuals need to make our own choices; that the best future isn't necessarily a regression to a smarter, restyled past; and that despite what may lie ahead, most of us simply refuse to have our future—or even our dinner—decided for us.