

Recipe for America: Why Our Food System is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It

By Jill Richardson

Paperback, 224 pages, \$15.95

Ig Publishing: Brooklyn, NY

July 2009

Can we turn our currently unsustainable food system, a system that is unfair to workers, bad for our health, cruel to animals and destructive to our environment, into one that treats workers fairly, respects human and animal rights, nourishes our bodies and renews the land?

Food activist Jill Richardson answers the far-reaching question of whether fundamental change to our food system is possible with a resounding "Yes!" in her new *Recipe for America*, even as she acknowledges the difficulties and challenges of transforming the complicated, interconnected network that makes up today's food supply chains.

Richardson, who first discovered her talent for writing about food issues here at Daily Kos as OrangeClouds115, has turned in a terrific book in *Recipe for America*, managing to organize into one smooth narrative information as disparate as employing undocumented workers and the lobbying that goes into the Farm Bill. Under her educated eye, the pieces of the enormous puzzle of legislation, policy, science and environmentalism are woven together in a book that can serve as an introduction to those unfamiliar with the sustainable food movement, while expanding the base of knowledge of those who've been reading on the topic for years.

This is no small feat. Juggling the needs of newcomers to a topic without losing the interest of the already informed is a problem that many writers with many more books under their belt than Richardson have failed to solve.

At least part of the reason she's able to reach different audiences is the organization of the book. Wisely, she begins with an account of her own journey in the opening chapter of the book, "From Eater to Activist." In this section, she recounts a journey familiar to many Daily Kos users — interest in a subject becomes deepened by participation in the community, and interaction with fellow activists who inform each other leads to participation in the wider sustainability movement as a whole.

Richardson focuses thereafter on the many threads that make up the pattern of food politics and policy today. She gives an overview of the burgeoning organics movement, tracing the beginning of the use of pesticides, the discovery that many of the chemicals were harmful, and the resulting fight that began in the last century to move to natural methods of control. This fight takes on not only agribusiness, but behemoth chemical companies like Monsanto as well, and she chronicles both the science behind the struggles and the policy ins-and-outs as well.

Richardson approaches her subject on a very personal level. Her descriptions of food, fields and farms clearly comes from a person who genuinely luxuriates in the natural settings she investigates, but it also signals someone who richly enjoys the taste, look and feel of healthy food. She gets to know the vendors at the farmers markets she frequents, she relishes tours of sustainable hog farms. Every step of the way, she is weaving factual material and news accounts about food safety, agricultural policy, the mistreatment of undocumented workers, animal rights.

Labeling, complicated enough to be worthy of a book in its own right, is distilled down to its essence in Richardson's account, and the chapter explaining the evolution of the growing consumer demand to know exactly what's in the food that's going into our systems is sharp and focused. The Farm Bill, in all its arcane detail--how it came to be and all that goes into it--rates a chapter of its own.

The strongest part of the book addresses marketing to children and, in particular, looks at school lunch programs and the efforts to incorporate more healthful food. So many restraints are in place, both at the national level and at the local institutional level, it would be tempting to give up altogether in this area: fiscal restrictions, logistical problems with transporting healthful food to urban schools in a timely fashion, the seeming monopoly the junk food industry has negotiated to market products to students. Yet it's here that Richardson's real gift shines; despite the monolithic obstacles, she manages to focus on the problem, part by part, breaking down where political and social pressure can be brought to bear to begin change in each area.

Throughout the book, this can-do attitude is reflected while still grappling with the systemic macro problems. A helpful appendix to the book is specifically action-oriented, chockfull of handy reference material and contacts for specific issues. In what the author calls an "action tool kit," readers can find out how to sign up for action alerts regarding consumer rights, water concerns or organic food labeling; how to track pertinent food legislation; how to follow Congressional committee hearings live; how to read the best blogs on food policy and issues; and how to write a letter to the editor.

Many of these actions would probably be well-known to Richardson's hometown activist crowd at Daily Kos, but it's likely that not all of them are. And that attention to detail in each related area is what makes this book succeed on multiple levels, for neophyte and informed activist equally. The micro and the macro are masterfully blended, and the information, passionately and painstakingly delivered, is packaged to empower rather than overwhelm readers with despair.

What more could one ask for from an activist who found her voice in an activist community? In *Recipe for America*, Richardson has shown what can emerge when an ordinary citizen finds her subject and her stride, and brings her knowledge onto a bigger stage.