

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal

Eric Schlosser

What We Eat

OVER THE LAST THREE DECADES, fast food has infiltrated every nook and cranny of American society. An industry that began with a handful of modest hot dog and hamburger stands in southern California has spread to every corner of the nation, selling a broad range of foods wherever paying customers may be found. Fast food is now served at restaurants and drive-throughs, at stadiums, airports, zoos, high schools, elementary schools, and universities, on cruise ships, trains, and airplanes, at K-Marts, Wal-Marts, gas stations, and even at hospital cafeterias. In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food; in 2000, they spent more than \$110 billion. Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers, computer software, or new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music - combined.

Pull open the glass door, feel the rush of cool air, walk in, get on line, study the backlit color photographs above the counter, place your order, hand over a few dollars, watch teenagers in uniforms pushing various buttons, and moments later take hold of a plastic tray full of food wrapped in colored paper and cardboard. The whole experience of buying fast food has become so routine, so thoroughly unexceptional and mundane, that it is now taken for granted, like brushing your teeth or stopping for a red light. It has become a social custom as American as a small, rectangular, hand-held, frozen, and reheated apple pie. This is a book about fast food, the values it embodies, and the world it has made. Fast food has proven to be a revolutionary force in American life; I am interested in it both as a commodity and as a metaphor. What people eat (or don't eat) has always been determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, and technological forces. The early Roman Republic was fed by its citizen-farmers; the Roman Empire, by its slaves. A nation's diet can be more revealing than its art or literature. On any given day in the United States about one-quarter of the adult population visits a fast food restaurant. During a relatively brief period of time, the fast food industry has helped to transform not only the American diet, but also our landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture. Fast food and its consequences have become inescapable, regardless of whether you eat it twice a day, try to avoid it, or have never taken a single bite.

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The McDonald's Corporation has become a powerful symbol of America's service economy, which is now responsible for 90 percent of the country's new jobs. In 1968, McDonald's operated about one thousand restaurants. Today it has about twenty-eight thousand restaurants worldwide and opens almost two thousand new ones each year. An estimated one out of every eight workers in the United States has at some point been employed by McDonald's. The company annually hires about one million people, more than any other American organization, public or private. McDonald's is the nation's largest purchaser of beef, pork, and potatoes - and the second largest purchaser of chicken. The McDonald's Corporation is the largest owner of retail property in the world. Indeed, the company earns the majority of its profits not from selling food but from collecting rent. McDonald's spends more money on advertising and marketing than any other brand. As a result it has replaced Coca-Cola as the world's most famous brand. McDonald's operates more playgrounds than any other private entity in the United States. It is one of the nation's largest distributors of toys. A survey of American schoolchildren found that 96 percent could identify Ronald McDonald. The only fictional character with a higher degree of recognition was Santa Claus. The impact of McDonald's on the way we live today is hard to overstate. The Golden Arches are now more widely recognized than the Christian cross.

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A hamburger and french fries became the quintessential American meal in the 1950s, thanks to the promotional efforts of the fast food chains. The typical American now consumes approximately three hamburgers and four orders of french fries every week. But the steady barrage of fast food ads, full of thick juicy burgers and long golden fries, rarely mentions where these foods come from nowadays or what ingredients they contain.

In the potato fields and processing plants of Idaho, in the ranchlands east of Colorado Springs, in the feedlots and slaughterhouses of the High Plains, you can see the effects of fast food on the nation's rural life, its environment, its workers, and its health.

The fast food chains' vast purchasing power and their demand for a uniform product have encouraged fundamental changes in how cattle are raised, slaughtered, and processed into ground beef. These changes have made meatpacking - once a highly skilled, highly paid occupation - into the most dangerous job in the United States, performed by armies of poor, transient immigrants whose injuries often go unrecorded and uncompensated. And the same meat industry practices that endanger these workers have facilitated the introduction of deadly pathogens, such as E. coli 0157:H7, into America's hamburger meat, a food aggressively marketed to children. Again and again, efforts to prevent the sale of tainted ground beef have been thwarted by meat industry lobbyists and their allies in Congress. The federal government has the legal authority to recall a defective toaster oven or stuffed animal - but still lacks the power to recall tons of contaminated, potentially lethal meat.

I do not mean to suggest that fast food is solely responsible for every social problem now haunting the United States. In some cases (such as the malling and sprawling of the West) the fast food industry has been a catalyst and a symptom of larger economic trends. In other cases (such as the rise of franchising and the spread of obesity) fast food has played a more central role.

The aesthetics of fast food are of much less concern to me than its impact upon the lives of ordinary Americans, both as workers and consumers. Most of all, I am concerned about its impact on the nation's children. Fast food is heavily marketed to children and prepared by people who are barely older than children. This is an industry that both feeds and feeds off the young. During the two years spent researching this book, I ate an enormous amount of fast food. Most of it tasted pretty good. That is one of the main reasons people buy fast food; it has been carefully designed to taste good. It's also inexpensive and convenient. But the value meals, two-for-one deals, and free refills of soda give a distorted sense of how much fast food actually costs. The real price never appears on the menu.

Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases. They rarely consider where this food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them. They just grab their tray off the counter, find a table, take a seat, unwrap the paper, and dig in. The whole experience is transitory and soon forgotten. I've written this book out of a belief that people should know what lies behind the shiny, happy surface of every fast food transaction. They should know what really lurks between those sesame-seed buns. As the old saying goes: You are what you eat.

1. **What is the author's issue?**
2. **What details do they give the reader to support that point?**
3. **What *tactics* does the writer employ that make this a particularly effective piece of writing?**

The hidden toll of Hurricane Maria: With basic necessities lacking, ailments become life-threatening

Abel, David. Boston Globe: Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]09 Oct 2017: A.1.

COROZAL, Puerto Rico — He was a patient man who rarely betrayed his emotions, a father of six who didn't want to trouble anyone for something he could do himself, even with his condition. The four-bedroom home where he and his wife had lived for nearly four decades had been badly damaged during the storm, and they were now staying with a daughter who lived nearby, where there was no power or running water, like just about everywhere else on the island. Still, Victor Hugo Ruiz didn't complain.

When their cars began to run low on fuel — a crucial commodity, as he now used a car battery to power the machine helping to treat his emphysema — the 64-year-old retired bartender found a canister and walked to a gas station about a half mile from his daughter's house in this small city near the island's center. “He was trying to fix things,” said Ana Ruiz, his wife.

It was early in the morning, less than a week after Hurricane Maria ripped apart Puerto Rico. Ruiz and other neighbors waited there in a growing line in the hot sun. They continued to wait as night fell. He passed the time playing cards with relatives and eating rice and beans, which they bought from a nearby food truck that charged them three times the normal price. Later, his wife relieved him in line for about a half hour, so he could sleep briefly. Periodically, he would connect his machine to her old Suzuki SUV's battery and inhale the solution that made it easier for him to breath. “He was clearly tired,” said Reinaldo Ruiz, his brother, who spent part of the day with him.

Ruiz remained in line until about 7 p.m. the next day, Sept. 27 — about 35 hours after he had arrived. It was then that a worker at a nearby propane gas plant opened a valve that had been damaged by the hurricane, sparking a fire that sent a cloud of black smoke over Corozal. Police officers ordered Ruiz and the others waiting for gas to evacuate the area immediately.

So the haggard man, who was known throughout the area for his skill making piña colodas at a local hotel and his prowess playing dominoes, lumbered into his wife's SUV and began driving to his daughter's house. When he arrived, Ruiz opened the vehicle's door and, with one leg out, lost consciousness. He was still wearing the inhaler connected to his breathing machine. His wife was inside, taking insulin for her diabetes. When she found him parked outside, he awoke briefly. “I can't breathe,” he told her. Before long, Ruiz was dead.

Officials in Puerto Rico have counted 39 people who had died on the island as the result of the hurricane. But that number didn't include Ruiz or many others like him who perished after the fierce winds and ruinous flooding had abated.

Indeed, with communications crippled across nearly the entire island and insufficient fuel for people to get around, the number of dead may be significantly higher. The death toll is likely to grow, as more of the island's 3.4 million residents succumb to the strains of living without electricity, running water, and easy access to medical care. The challenges are so great across the island that it has become difficult to bury the dead. Many of the island's roughly 200 funeral homes have closed, lacking generators to chill the cadavers and keep them from decomposing. Meanwhile, morgues have been operating at capacity or beyond. At the HIMA San Pablo in Caguas, just south of San Juan, hospital officials said they had to start stacking bodies on top of one another to make space.

The demand for space at the Center for Forensic Sciences in San Juan, where those who die outside a hospital must be taken to obtain a death certificate, had increased so much that they're receiving help from the military. About 50 soldiers from the Army Reserve have set up a base behind coiled razor wire at the center, where they're operating four mobile morgues that can hold 16 cadavers each.

At the Funeraria Hernández in Corozal, where Ruiz would be taken, the funeral home had received 18 bodies less than two weeks after the hurricane — nearly double the number they usually receive in a month. “A lot of people with preexisting conditions, it seems, are dying from the stress,” said Mary Carmen, the funeral director.

Because relatives of the dead haven't been able to reach the funeral home by phone, many have been walking into Carmen's office, delivering the deceased on their own. When they haven't been able to get there, as many roads remained littered with fallen trees and downed powerlines, Carmen has had to rent a four-wheel vehicle to collect the dead.

There has also been the challenge of getting the required paperwork signed. It's illegal under most circumstances to bury the dead without proper authorization. Before the storm, getting a death certificate at the Center for Forensic Sciences would often take less than a half hour, if there were no signs of violence. Now the refrigerated vans operated by funeral homes snake around the center in long lines, and it takes as much as seven hours for pathologists to complete the required photos, fingerprints, and weighing before the paperwork can be signed, Carmen said. With just two other employees on staff, Carmen has had to delay funerals, spending more of her time searching for diesel to keep her generators running and gas to fuel her hearse. The extra work has also raised her expenses. She expects to lose \$3,000 a month until electricity is restored, which officials have said could take until next year. "I have 23 years working as a funeral director, and I have never seen as many difficulties as now," she said.

Five days after Victor Ruiz died, his embalmed body was lying in the air-conditioned parlor at Funeraria Hernández, where a generator hummed in the distance and nearly 100 friends and relatives had gathered. Many of them fingered rosary beads and wailed as they approached the casket, where the bearded man with the groomed salt and pepper hair lay in a pressed, powder-blue guayabera. Beneath fluorescent lights and electric votive candles, Kariana Ruiz stood over her father's body, rubbing her belly. She was five months pregnant and heartbroken. Her father would never get to meet her unborn daughter. "I don't have the words to express how I feel, but I blame the hurricane," she said. Like many others on the island, she was eager to leave and move to her sister's in Florida. But she was worried about her mother, whose diabetes requires constant treatment with insulin, which has to be refrigerated. "This is hard on all of us," said Kariana Ruiz, a preschool teacher who had just been fired from her job because her school remained closed. "This island isn't the same place as it was before."

When an employee of the funeral home began turning a knob to close the casket, the tears flowed and relatives said their final goodbyes. "Many people loved you," one said. With relatives holding her up, Ana Ruiz clutched a crucifix and shook her head. "I don't know what I'm going to do," she said. "He was such a good husband." Pallbearers wheeled the silver casket to a 20-year-old Cadillac Fleetwood. The white hearse led a line of vehicles through the devastated community, where many of the homes lacked roofs, and utility lines dangled dangerously over the road. After the procession arrived at the Corozal Memorial Park, they gathered in a humid chapel, where a short-sleeved priest apologized for the lack of air conditioning and music. He noted how three of Ruiz's children who live on the mainland were unable to come to the funeral, as it was too hard to get a flight after the hurricane. "We won't let this get us down," the priest said. Reinaldo Ruiz noted that another sibling who lives on the island couldn't be reached and probably had no idea that their brother had died.

Afterward, as her relatives departed, Ana Ruiz slipped into her Suzuki, the car where her husband died. The windshield remained shattered after part of her garage's metal roof collapsed onto it during the hurricane. She steered through the wreckage of her town, passing the gas station where her husband had waited so long without ever getting gas, and to her abandoned house. On her porch was an electric bill, even though there hadn't been electricity in nearly two weeks.

As she walked through the two-story house — family photos on the walls now had mold, shattered windows littered the floor, and small pools of fetid water remained — she described how she had already thrown away ruined mattresses, a sofa, and other furniture they had owned for years. But she didn't dwell on her loss. "I have lived the American Dream," she said. She pointed to the trophies her husband had won for mixing cocktails and in domino competitions. "No matter how much we thought we were prepared, we weren't," she said. "This was the big one, the real one, that you can't prepare for." Still, she wasn't giving up. "We spent too much time building this house, there are too many memories," she said. "Tomorrow, I'll begin cleaning up."

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