

# Reviews

## *Good Apples: Behind Every Bite*

Susan Futrell

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017

262 pp. Illustrations. \$20.00 (paper); \$20.00 (eBook)

Today we have more food choices at the market than ever before, but fewer of us make decisions about what food goes to market. In explaining this power imbalance, some food researchers in the field of political economy highlight corporate concentration. How exactly does corporate concentration affect decision-making in food production and consumption in daily life? With decades of experience in food distribution and marketing, Susan Futrell observes firsthand the growing competitive pressure in and the consolidation of the apple industry. Through apple growers' life stories, *Good Apples* reveals the forces deciding which apple varieties are grown, marketed, and eaten in the United States, and the implications thereof. These compelling stories inform a general readership of how the apple industry has evolved in the United States and of how modern apple growers are tirelessly adapting to new challenges in order to bring good apples to the market.

Of many striking facts in this book, one especially stood out to me: more than fifty new apple varieties were invented in 2015, despite growers knowing that fifty was too many for consumers. New apple varieties tend to have trendy names including Cosmic Crisp, SnapDragon, and Arctic. Yet not all varieties are or will be commercially successful, so growers are *betting* on the new varieties they plant. Commercial success is determined less by good apples than by good marketing, and apple marketing is executed by large sales organizations and is judged by large retail chains. Large retail chains love new varieties. Small and medium-sized growers have little negotiating power. For them, betting on the wrong new variety results in economic loss and their good apples going to waste. Futrell identifies a trend in apple farming: “get big, get niche, or get out” (p.139). As discussed below, this trend in many ways generates new challenges for apple growers and eaters. It is

emblematic of a broader economic process that puts food democracy and sustainability at stake.

*Good Apples* shows how, in some cases, getting big is a prerequisite for getting niche. SweeTango is a new variety argued by some growers to outperform Honeycrisp in every way. However, not every grower has access to it. SweeTango was developed with public funding at University of Minnesota, but the university gave licensing control to a private business, which made SweeTango a club variety that could only be grown by club members. The variety was also made a national brand and thus could not be marketed as a local fruit in Minnesota. In order to plant SweeTango, Minnesota growers had to join the club. This meant that growers had to commit to a large allotment and pay significant marketing and royalty fees. Small and medium-sized growers were left out. The variety's localness was stripped.

In my view, the niche is not always serving the interest of growers or consumers. One group of new apple varieties, Arctic, achieved a distinctive nonbrowning feature by genetic engineering. Futrell shows that in the United States, some growers are worried that genetic modification could taint the reputation of the apple industry and contaminate non-GMO fruit. It reminds me of the GM apple controversies here in Canada and that not all consumers are excited about Arctic's genetically modified cosmetic benefit. For example, a survey found that 69 percent of Canadians did not want Arctic apples approved by their government (Leger Marketing 2012). Yet the GM apples still received regulatory approval.

Futrell finds that the “get big, get niche, or get out” trend can weaken the niche. Red Delicious apples used to be more delicious, but in order to increase sales, growers selected redder mutations with more impressive shape. Over time, the visual appeal of Red Delicious progressed at the expense of flavor. What happened to Red Delicious now happens to tasty new varieties such as Honeycrisp. Futrell observes, “Despite the cautionary tale of the Red Delicious, nursery catalogs and trade magazines tout the newest, reddest versions of established favorites” (p.102).

This fact makes me wonder: Does the food industry's fixation with aesthetics really benefit consumers or growers? Will most consumers want their favorite apples replaced with redder new varieties, if they know the story of Red Delicious?

Growing up in China, I was used to buying apples carried by street vendors in baskets under a shoulder pole. Vendors would slice samples of unbranded apples and passersby would buy them simply if they liked the taste. In my memory, prior to all the new varieties there were just two kinds of apples: red and green. The former being sweeter and the latter tart and crispy. Both were affordable and ubiquitous.

The book concludes with a discussion of democracy in the food system, urging citizens to view food as a public good and act accordingly. I could not agree more with this argument. To build a democratic and sustainable food system, the decision-making about food production and consumption needs to involve more civic engagement. This will need more citizens to be interested in engaging with the food system, and *Good Apples* may spark that interest.

—Ning Dai, *University of Waterloo*

#### REFERENCE

Leger Marketing. 2012. *Canadian Public Opinion Poll: Arctic Apple Issue*. July 3. Accessed March 1, 2020. [www.bcfga.com/files/file/Report%20on%20GE%20survey%20-%20July%203%202012.pdf](http://www.bcfga.com/files/file/Report%20on%20GE%20survey%20-%20July%203%202012.pdf).

#### *Food Justice and Narrative Ethics: Reading Stories for Ethical Awareness and Activism*

Beth A. Dixon

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018

177 pp. \$120.00 (hardcover); \$39.95 (paperback); \$35.95 (eBook)

Beth A. Dixon's engaging roadmap of a book—she calls it a “travelogue” (p.17)—offers scholars and activists an ethical method for assessing, articulating, and ultimately activating a pathway toward food system change that runs through ethics, politics, and the creative work of storytelling. Dixon explores the impact that a particular kind of narrative, which she calls a “Food Justice Narrative,” can have when told and read in a particular way. The process of its writing and reading illuminates an ethical mode through which to analyze injustices across the food system, and positions a reader or viewer to see the issues anew.

Intellectually expansive, the book cites Aristotle and Plato, as well as more familiar names in food studies like Michael Pollan, Janet Poppendieck, and Joshua Sbicca. Expansive in form as well, the book ranges from memoir-esque journal entries on gardening and food pantry volunteering to philosophical expositions on the development of ethical reasoning, to case

studies on food justice stories that effectively describe, for instance, the struggles of migrant farm laborers to battle oppressive working conditions.

The core theme of the book, which draws a direct line from composing a narrative to developing ethical expertise to the work of ethical analysis and food justice, embeds itself within the book's format: Dixon's personal story tracks her own development of food system expertise through experience as it steadily merges with her analytical story. As a result, both form and content convey that, for Dixon, the process of crafting a narrative serves an educative, epiphanic function; it positions the writer as a citizen or as an intellectual pilgrim rather than simply as an expert. The reader, then, finds a complementary position as a fellow traveler. That epiphanic journey comprises a story within the story, where Dixon comes to understand the systemic basis of food system injustices while at the same time providing a model for readers to analyze the issues in a different way.

Dixon arrives at the subject of food justice by way of philosophy, which she teaches at SUNY Plattsburgh. She locates her text within the ecosystem of philosophical works on ethics, focusing on the acquisition and application of ethics to “practical settings in order to cultivate a sensitivity to what is ethically salient about particular situations that fall within the domain of food justice” (p.22). In that ecosystem, the practical application of ethical expertise to the issue of food justice seems to stand out as a new pathway for engagement; her form and methodology are versatile enough to be easily transferable to numerous other social domains and issues. Within the food studies ecosystem, however—for students, researchers, and activists alike—this work offers a useful method, grounded in ethics, for thinking critically on and writing about food insecurity, the mistreatment of migrant farmworkers, and other issues of injustice in the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

Dixon shows how a Food Justice Narrative creates an “epistemic vantage point ... ideal for undertaking food justice activism” (p.10). This vantage point positions the reader to see particular details of a story and the systemic, structural constraints shaping those details, which in turn can inspire action. Through its critical creative work, a Food Justice Narrative acts to “resist or to rewrite a particular master narrative ... to correct the ethical damage or oppressive ideology created” (p.137) by that master narrative, which conveys default societal perspectives on how one comes to be food insecure or how migrant farmworkers come to find themselves in oppressive conditions. These default narratives tend to focus responsibility on the individual and often connect deservedness for food or other assistance to the degree of one's “innocence” regarding