

The real winners were the
burgeoning agribusiness firms.

Feast and Famine, Farm and Factory:

A Scenic Tour Through the Back Kitchen of the Food Industry

by Todd Mercer

In 2007 and 2008, food prices around the globe rose precipitously. Staples, like rice, tripled before leveling off, causing average families in many countries to spend half their income or more for a minimally sufficient count of calories. The price explosions are blamed on the convergence of several factors: crude oil prices, drought, increased consumption in developing countries, and even the diversion of grains into bio-fuels. By the time American mortgage bankers and investment firms began to close up shop, hunger had become a reality that was no longer taking place only far away, or in history books, or among those unwilling to work.



Before the economic slowdown hit, curiosity about food chains and the inner workings of the food industry was stimulated by books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Marion Nestle's *Food Politics*, and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*. Now university presses and their fantastically informed writers are leading the response to the public's demand for information. We all want to know what goes on between the farmer's

plow and the shopping cart. Here are timely, engaging books from aestheticians, survivalists, scientists, and modern muckrakers, written strictly for people who haven't broken the habit of consuming food.

The fearless Raj Patel, who has been tear-gassed on several continents protesting the World Trade Organization

and the World Bank, demonstrates with quotations and moving examples that the health of citizens around the world is threatened by purposeful, convoluted thinking in the corridors of power. *Stuffed & Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (Melville House, 978-1-933633-49-7) shows that increases in hunger and obesity aren't contradictory.

Patel traveled the world to gather facts first-hand and this book pulls no punches. It traces food chains wonderfully well, drawing startling linkages of cause and effect. The quality of writing is among the best in the genre. His moral argument is that Western consumers should be willing to pay more for their food, given the assurance that impoverished producers would benefit. He supports a living wage to pay those fair prices, but with twice as much hunger present in the United States in this year as last, his idealistic aim seems, at least for the moment, unachievable.

"The competitor is our friend and the customer is our enemy..."

—DWAYNE ANDREAS, THEN THE CHAIRMAN
OF ARCHER DANIELS MIDLAND (1995)