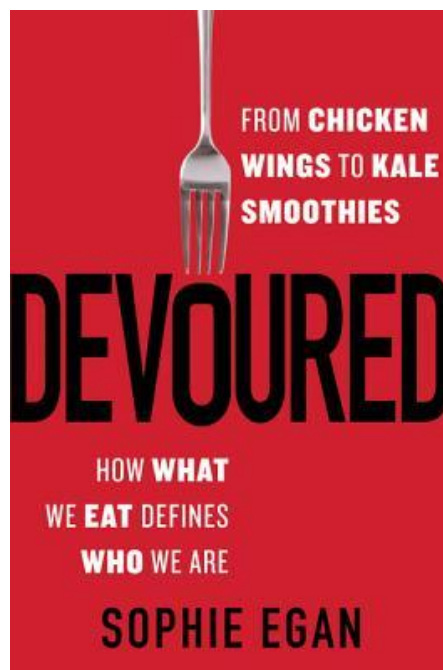




Devoured: From Chicken Wings to Kale Smoothies--How What We Eat Defines Who We Are

Sophie Egan

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A provocative look at how and what Americans eat and why—a flavorful blend of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Salt Sugar Fat*, and *Freakonomics* that reveals how the way we live shapes the way we eat

Food writer and Culinary Institute of America director Sophie Egan takes readers on an eye-opening journey through the American food psyche, examining the connections between the values that define our national character—work, freedom, and progress—and our eating habits, the good and the bad. Egan explores why these values make for such an unstable, and often unhealthy, food culture and, paradoxically, why they also make America's cuisine so great.

Egan raises a host of intriguing questions: Why does McDonald's have 107 items on its menu? Why are breakfast sandwiches, protein bars, and gluten-free anything so popular? Will bland, soul-less meal replacements like Soylent revolutionize our definition of a meal? The search for answers takes her across the culinary landscape, from the prioritization of convenience over health to the unintended consequences of “perks” like free meals for employees; the American obsession with “having it our way” to the surge of Starbucks, Chipotle, and other chains individualizing the eating experience; from high culture—artisan and organic and what exactly “natural” means—to low culture—the sale of 100 million Taco Bell Doritos Locos Tacos in ten weeks. She also looks at how America's cuisine—like the nation itself—has been shaped by diverse influences from across the globe.

Forked weaves together insights from the fields of psychology, anthropology, food science, and behavior economics as well as myriad examples from daily life to create a powerful and unique look at food in America.

Devoured: From Chicken Wings to Kale Smoothies--How What We Eat Defines Who We Are Details

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Eat Defines Who We Are Sophie Egan

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Julie says

There's some promise here. And an interesting topic. But ultimately I found myself drowning in facts. Lots of little bits of facts. (Number of items for sale in a grocery store, say.) Many of the facts are interesting, but after a while it's too much like reading an almanac. And while she makes good and interesting points, they too are overwhelmed by all the tiny little facts.

I can imagine that having gathered them all, one wants to use them. and many of them are the kind of thing you want to immediately go and tell someone else. Some of her observations are also intriguing--the way our culture shapes our beliefs about food is something I find fascinating. But ultimately I would have preferred a much more sparing use of facts and a good deal more well-thought out observational synthesis.

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Covers a lot of the same ground as Pandora's Lunchbox, Salt Sugar Fat, The Dorito Effect, but if you enjoy those books, as I have, you'll like this one too. Sophie Egan has a conversational style and seems ready to try anything. A few of the topics in Devoured that I don't recall seeing in the other books of this type are "stunt foods" such as KFC's Double Down, and products that promote what they DON'T contain, such as gluten-free.

Austin Barselau says

Sophie Egan's *Devoured: How What We Eat Defines Who We Are* probes the mores of American food culture to find out what unites and divides us. Egan argues that food mirrors the American mindset, reflecting our common habits, tendencies, and livelihoods. There are several themes she seems to develop throughout the book, including the impact of the overbearing work culture on our food choices, how individualism and the need for self-expression colors our eating choices, and how social functions like the Super Bowl and holidays drive food sales.

Each chapter explores a different chunk of American food culture, from our growing dependence on cheese and spaghetti, to the "democratization" of wine through the production of cheaper brand names, and food entrepreneurship and innovation at fast casual establishments like the Doritos Locos Taco at Taco Bell. There is a bit of disjointedness to the book, as Egan has a difficult time connecting the chapters to validate her thesis. In fact, there doesn't seem to be a thesis outside of "we are defined by the food we eat." Perhaps this book could have been strengthened if the subtitle had been flipped from "how what we eat defines who we are" to "who we are defines what and how we eat." The causation is flipped to the more apt expression of how our overlapping traits as Americans determines what we pick off the shelves and what we order at our restaurants. From there, she could have weaved the narrative of how American culture imbues in its citizens a spirit of individualism and curiosity, and how that, for example, contributes to our demand for convenience and portable snacks in lieu of breakfast, the proliferation of foreign foods and restaurants in American towns and cities, and the popularity of "cheffing" or adding items not stated on the menu to your order. Not only

would the thesis have been clearer, but the narrative would have been tighter and the chapters more related.

Egan's writing style is piss-poor. It goes from stable prose to chatty digressions marked by unhandy and cheesy attempts at humor and wit. The tone is mostly chatty and casual, perhaps too much. This could have been a more interesting read had the subject been given a tad bit more gravitas. Combined with an incoherent thesis and disjointed elaborations of different facets of American cuisine and food culture, Egan's unwieldy writing pattern yields a book that is remarkably unexceptional and short of its potential.

Christina says

Great piece divulging the depths of American food culture. Sophie provides insight into the behavioural economics and advertising schemes that go into our daily food products, and ties it to Americans cultural values as a whole. For example, snacking arises from the constant need to be efficient and working all day. She says, "what's driving this constant munching is a combination of being efficiency oriented - I suppose we can use our hands to feed our mouths while we use our eyes to look at shoes - and our concerns about following the latest nutritional guidance, which, in some cases, has been the slow trickle approach to calorie intake." Egan traces American values of work productivity and reflects how these conceptions affect our daily habits. Therefore, no longer is it looked down upon to eat your lunch at your desk table and stare at your computer in an office. Go you Ted, you are working even during lunch! But this doesn't give our minds a break and decreases our overall proficiency.

Egan proposes that instead of pumping our foods with salt, fat and sugar we focus on "farming for flavor". In other words creating more wholesome produce to begin with, which tastes amazing and fresh, avoiding the need to overload it with buttery sauces and cheesy crusts. Additionally, health nutritionists should stop studying single-nutrient studies (for example studying effects of goji berries) and and do more wholesome, full-context studies of how people eat.

Loved this part : "Brunch is a secular church, Sunday service for socially starved. Something for the nothings. Specifically, something soulful and restorative." We all have the need to be socially content in our lives and the tradition of brunch amongst millennial gives us a reason to meet with each other, linger over a fine meal and catch up over our lives. I thought this chapter was insightful and funny over the young lives of millennials and how brunch has become the way to socialize in a wholesome manner on the weekends.

Other quotes: "Just as we feel guilt about indulgence and pleasure in our food, we feel guilt about leisure. When we aren't eating healthy, we feel guilty. We've got to clear out these plagues on our conscience. Because the problem isn't that we never treat ourselves - it's how we feel about it when we do."

"A deeper and much-less-discussed reason for dieting is an underlying fear of death in this country. In general, we medicalize aging - from treating wrinkles with injections and creams to prolonging life no matter the tradeoffs. Most of us are uncomfortable talking about or even thinking about dying. It's often not until it comes time to care for a dying parent or relative that we really confront the idea of our own mortality. And when we do, it can involve IV's and hospital beds and long, expensive, agonizing procedures that are enough to scare the wits out of every one of us. We are left helpless, and researching the secrets to longevity and then following them religiously is the best we can do to channel our anxiety into action."

Christina Kaoh says

Meh. I started out thinking that I really liked the author's writing style - it was lightly humorous and definitely written by a millennial for a millennial. However, I found it not very insightful or additive to my knowledge. Perhaps the only new bits of information I gleaned was how America became a wine drinking country (because it was cheap) and Egan's analysis that the nature of work/labor had drastically changed the way we eat. I see the latter as a labor problem, and as she quickly notes in her recommendations, it's going to take a lot more to fix that.

Found her recommendations at the end sort of lack-luster. Good effort for a first book, but does not rise to the same journalistic level or provide the insights of predecessors "Fast Food Nation" or "Salt, Sugar, Fat".

Sarah says

Fascinating! It's no secret I find the subject of food interesting but this comprehensive exploration of American food culture exceeded my expectations. To use a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad pun - I devoured it! Author Sophie Egan discusses in depth how and why we eat the way we do here in the twenty-first century United States of America. From the sad desk lunch to family dinners to our reliance on convenience foods our habits are NOT in line with those of our ancestors. She also tackles how wine gained popularity (much of the credit goes to none other than Joe Coulombe aka "Trader Joe" and his famous, or infamous, "Two Buck Chuck") false shortages in the days prior to the iconic American Super Bowl holiday (anyone remember the cries of lack of chicken wings or avocados?) and the popularity of "absence" foods, that is those lacking fat, carbs, sodium, etc. And, pleasing to my proud Italian roots (are you reading this Dad?) why Italian American food has had such a significant impact on our society and why it has been so eagerly embraced by the majority of those with working taste buds (pasta, pizza, cheese, bread - duh!) I was so thoroughly impressed with the research, quality of writing, and down-to-earth humor I was able to overlook her status as a millennial and simply savor this engaging read.

Marcia Scurfield says

I'm VERY excited to be receiving this through the Goodreads First Reads program! Looks interesting. Whatever Miss T eats turns into Miss T. Lately that must mean I'm a cookie.

Kater Cheek says

When I think about food, it's usually in the context of "what am I going to make for dinner" or gnashing my teeth in irritation about coworkers evangelizing about their latest fad diets. Food is a huge part of our culture and our identity, (a fact that I was made well aware of when creating a faerie world in which people don't eat.) But what is American food culture? Egan takes a stab at discussing it in this book.

Egan begins talking about a hypothetical American office worker's typical eating day. In fact, a large chunk of the book talks about the relationship between food and work. Some of it was quite enlightening. If you snack (and who doesn't?) you eat more than people who just eat meals, because the not-meal nature of a snack falls outside of what you consider your daily intake. She talks about how typical the snack-heavy day is for a "typical" worker, especially with the donuts that someone else brings in, the company-provided chocolates, the portable lunch eaten at a computer (aptly named "Sad Desk Lunch.") This will seem eye-opening familiar to anyone who works a white-collar corporate job, and baffling to people whose work

doesn't involve a monitor and a keyboard.

Considering her hypothetical worker is in his thirties and works at Google, I can't say that there's much typical about him except the snacking all day. But it did make me think about the times when I had a Kind bar instead of cooking myself breakfast, and about how much chocolate I consume now that I'm in a desk job, though the emergency chocolate at home can remain unconsumed for half a year or more.

Egan also focuses primarily on millennials, as she herself is one. (This really bothered me, because if millennials are doing research and writing books, that means millennials are adults, and if millennials are adults, that means I'm one too--when the heck did that happen?) She focuses on some millennial-driven change that is positive and some that is negative. On the positive side, she puts brunch, a "secular church" or way of lingering over a meal to savor pleasure and camaraderie with friends regardless of the time cost. She also includes fusion food (creating new and wonderful dishes, based on creativity over adherence to tradition), food trucks, and alternate packaging for wine. On the negative side, she puts over-proteined diets, energy bars and other packaged food (Soylent she finds particularly egregious), eating at your desk, stunt foods (such as oreo shakes or Doritos Locos tacos) and diets of any kind. This is the first place I've heard about a study that proved what I myself believed my whole life: dieting of any kind will make you fatter in the long run.

Egan also discusses briefly the history of certain aspects of American cuisine, such as our love of Italian food and the rise of Trader Joe's and the democratization of wine. She touches on what the cover promises "How What We Eat Defines Who We Are" but that's just a brief five categories which don't seem obvious or inclusive, and also don't really tell us anything about us personally, not even anything as obvious as "conservative housewives are more likely to use cheese in baked dishes" or "high-educated single women consume the most kale." I'd give it 5 stars if it actually delivered what the cover promised, (and if she stopped using "like" when she meant "such as" which probably bothers no one but me.)

But even though the book doesn't deliver on what the cover promises, it still contains a lot of fascinating information. Egan hasn't done much of her own firsthand research, but she's got access to quite a few excellent secondary sources, including the renowned author Brian Wansink, with whom she studied, and some food-industry giants whom she interviewed.

This is a fun and informative read if you're interested in food and culture, though if you're a die-hard dieter in the throes of your newest food cult, you'll probably get indignant that the author isn't a disciple of the one true word. The rest of us will get something out of it.

Jane says

I read half of this and listened to half of it. It's easy to read, lots of fun facts scattered throughout. The author seems to have done her research.

The author is snarky ("Oh, and I don't eat airline food. Talk about fifty shades of gross." (p. 188)) and somewhat elitist (although she claims she is not). The narrator's tone became quite annoying over time, but I'm not sure if that is her fault or the author's. I think the book would have been better if the author had kept more of herself out of it.

Also she is obsessed with brunch - that chapter was endless.

I read this for my book club that discusses books about food, climate, and the environment. Hopefully we

will find a lot to talk about.

Juliette says

There are several things I would like to say about this book I won on Goodreads:

- First, the subtitle "How what we eat defines who we are" is misleading. A better one would be "How who we are defines how we eat" (or something like that). Indeed, Sophie Egan explains mainly why we ("Americans") eat how we eat.
 - Second, this book would be more directed to people liking trivia. A lot of information, the organization is not always clear. The tone is very informal...
 - Third, something the author missed in why American people eat how they eat is the widespread idea that everything that is healthy is not good. The only time she evokes it is in the chapter "The Story of Spaghetti." It would have been interesting to see how/why vegetables have such a bad reputation.
 - Fourth, I think as a European (French), I am not the targeted reader... The description of the "really tempting" brunches, of the "irresistible" stunt foods, and so on, was just not that appealing to me.
-

Allisonlcarter says

This book is a bit like a "Marketplace" for food. Which is a compliment. There isn't really a lot new here -- much of it I'd picked up in bits and pieces over the years from reading media online -- but Egan's voice is so engaging and funny that it's pleasant to go over it again, within a more structured framework.

The standout chapter is definitely on how "Italian" cuisine shaped American food, and in a larger way how all non-Anglo-Germanic food has had an impact. That leads into her passionate last chapter, on ways we can improve our food system and create a better America. It's an optimistic, loving viewpoint that's high on our ability to come together and achieve anything. But wrapped up nicely in a snarky Millennial shell.

Margaret says

An interesting book, but not one that I could really relate to, not being American.

Some of the statistics were very interesting.

Probably be of more interest to American readers.

Cecily Kyle says

Really interesting read, however a little tough when you are PMSing and on a diet!

However, it was a good eye opener on how we think about food and why we make the choices that we do. There were times where what she was talking about, I really had no interest in but other things pulled me in. Good Read!

Heather(Gibby) says

This was a very interesting look at the American food culture. I found much of it fascinating. I am not an American, but I believe that Canadian food tastes most likely follow behind what is trending in American cuisine. There are some really interesting historical information of how different economic times, and the influence of immigrants on cuisine. One of the more disturbing facts in the book is that the average American spends more money on food in restaurants than they do in a grocery store. Super fun read!

Rachel León says

(3.5 stars) I don't like the subtitle ('How What We Eat Defines Who We Are') nor do I think it's entirely fitting or descriptive of what the book is actually about. In short, Egan's book is very much like a Mary Roach book, focusing on American food culture. I had the thought while reading that if Michael Pollan and Mary Roach were smashed together into a book baby, you'd get Devoured. It's definitely an enjoyable read for anyone interested in American food culture.
