



*Resetting the Table*  
Robert Paarlberg

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Food and Nutrition

### Summary

Consumers want to know more about their food - including the farm from which it came, the chemicals used in its production, its nutritional value, how the animals were treated, and the costs to the environment. They are being told that buying organic foods, unprocessed and sourced from small local farms, is the most healthful and sustainable option. Now, Robert Paarlberg reviews the evidence and finds an abundant reason to disagree. He delineates the ways in which global food markets have, in fact, improved our diet, and how "industrial" farming has recently turned green, thanks to GPS-guided precision methods that cut energy use and chemical pollution. He makes clear that America's serious obesity crisis does not come from farms, or from food deserts, but instead from "food swamps" created by food companies, retailers, and restaurant chains. And he explains how, though animal welfare is lagging behind, progress can be made through continued advocacy, more progressive regulations, and perhaps plant-based imitation meat. He finds solutions that can make sense for farmers and consumers alike and provides a road map through the rapidly changing worlds of food and farming, laying out a practical path to bring the two together.

### Questions

1. Paarlberg points to rising obesity rates in America as a dietary health crisis. Do you agree that obesity is a serious health problem, and what do think of Paarlberg's assertion that food-manufacturing companies (Big Food) are more to blame for this problem than commercial farmers (Big Ag)?
2. Is obesity a public health problem, or is it more a matter of personal responsibility? What does Paarlberg think? What can we learn from the fact that obesity prevalence in America has tripled since the 1960s, to reach 42 percent today? Has personal irresponsibility really tripled since the 1960s?
3. Paarlberg provides evidence that poor diets in America tend to be caused by "food swamps" rather than "food deserts." Has your food environment changed noticeably in the past decade or so, and do you feel that you are living or working in either a "food desert" or a "food swamp"?
4. Do you read the Nutrition Facts Panel on packaged foods when shopping in the market? If so, what are you looking for? Calories per serving? Daily values for things like fat and sodium, sugars, and vitamins? What would you change about nutrition labeling, if you could? What changes would Paarlberg like to see?

## Discussion Guide



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5. Do you think it would be a good idea to tax sugary beverages like soda? Some cities have recently done this, but neither the Democrats nor the Republicans in Congress favor such a tax. How does Paarlberg explain this firm bipartisan opposition?
6. Paarlberg says food companies target their advertising on a “moveable middle” of eaters who are most likely to be influenced by such ads. Young Americans, minorities, and those with less education tend to make up this moveable middle. Countries in Europe have placed restrictions on advertising soda and junk food to children while the U.S. hasn’t done so yet. Why do you think this is?
7. The author observes that half of all fresh fruit in America plus roughly one third of all fresh vegetables are being imported. How does this practice impact our nation’s dietary health? Do you believe we can grow these healthy foods locally instead? Why or why not?
8. The book illustrates a family of four following a USDA “Thrifty Food Plan” can purchase healthy foods that meet all of their dietary requirements for as little as \$2.00 per meal. If this is true, why do so few Americans consume healthy meals? Is it because they don’t have time to shop, cook, and clean up? Or are they simply addicted to the taste of unhealthy foods?
9. Organic produce costs, on average, 54 percent more than conventional produce. Paarlberg suggests that consumers who buy organic are not getting their money’s worth, either in terms of improved nutrition or greater food safety (e.g., avoiding pesticide residues). Do you agree or disagree with his argument?
10. Paarlberg observes that national science academies around the world say they have found no evidence of new risks to human health from genetically engineered foods (GMOs). He also notes that progressive thinkers who insist on “following science” when it comes to climate change and COVID-19 often push scientific assessments aside when it comes to GMOs. What explains their continued anxiety about eating GMOs?
11. In 2019 an international commission (named EAT-Lancet) concluded that most countries around the world should reduce their consumption of meat, not just to improve dietary health but also to guard “planetary health” by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from livestock production. If you agree, how might we reduce meat consumption in the United States? Should we impose taxes on meat to raise the price or develop substitutes, like tasty imitation meats made from plants? Paarlberg says “ultra-processed” foods present a dietary danger because they go down so quickly that we tend to overeat, and also because they tend to contain added sugar, salt, or fat. Does this mean we should stay away from processed foods completely? What kinds of food processing are actually good for dietary

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