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Review: Pour en Finir avec le Gaspillage Alimentaire

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Richard, E., *Pour en Finir avec le Gaspillage Alimentaire*. Montreal: Éditions Écosociété, 2021, 160 pp. ISBN: 9782897196134, CA\$14.00.

This practical book — available only in French from a Canadian publisher — is twofold: first, it seriously discusses the issue of food waste (and surpluses) at various levels, and then it aptly presents countless ways to avoid/prevent the loss of fresh food. From the first pages, we are reminded about some disturbing statistics related to the consequences of mismanaging fresh food in Western countries: that at every step of food production and distribution, about one third of what is cultivated is either lost or destroyed, according to a recent report from the UN (p. 8). To make matters even worse, another disturbing fact is that food waste itself contributes to 23% of Carbon-related emissions (p. 14). For no logical reason.

The first chapters retell us about our economic system based on (over)consumption, marketing, consumerism, large-scale planning, and inevitably wasting. At every level, and especially in supermarkets, employees and store managers always plan for more to be offered, to avoid empty spaces and the appearance of a lack of stocks. Instead of sticking to the standardized “supply and demand” dynamics, stores want to show they can combine quality, quantities, and diversity of all food products, and they too often plan for too much and will store too big inventories. Same issue goes for many individuals and families with their overfilled food reserves. The author highlights a contrast that seems like a paradox: while eating is fundamental for everyone, consuming is rather related to recomforting joy, immediate enjoyment, and pleasure, not just for necessity (p. 19). In wealthy, rich neighborhoods, the food industry constantly plans to offer the impressions of variety, overabundance, infinite renewal, perfect-looking aliments; and this is exactly how (and where) food waste begins (p. 19).

The author discusses countless situations and cases. For example, the well-known “best-before” dates and date labels on packaged food: according to a survey, 80% of Canadian consumers rely on these indicators to decide whether they will eat in full confidence or automatically eliminate these products right after the indicated expiration date (p. 41). Very often, these products are lost only because supermarkets (and many consumers as well) want to have excessively filled refrigerators and just cannot sell/prepare/cook/consume everything they have planned to offer or eat. In other words, wasting is planned and becomes part of the equation. Even for a single person, managing an individual fridge (and meals for one week) can often be a very demanding exercise, and bad decisions are often being transformed into wasted aliments. And things get more complicated as scales go bigger, as in big grocery stores. Among many refreshing ideas and tips, we discover ways (and even recipes) to recycle and re-use leftovers, and more importantly, preventing these situations when you might have to waste food before, say, going to a holiday: one must try to plan a long absence in one week from now and consequently avoid buying too much perishable food before departure (p. 85). The final chapters are all about new strategies and local initiatives for a better food managing, production, distribution, storage, and ultimately consumption without (over)consumption.

If you thought you knew about every anti-waste strategy, you might learn something original here. For instance, “potatoes, onions, and garlic will deteriorate much faster if you store them together, because these can give off ethylene gas” (p. 111). The Canadian context, where lots of goods must be imported, is quite specific and somewhat different from other countries. In fact, there seems to be very few equivalents of this book in the English language; it combines an abundance of scientific facts in a rigorous exposé, completed with countless examples of advice, tips, solutions, and new ways to avoid food wasting. While it would be instructive for readers in a public library, it would be helpful as well in a college library, where many students are likely to be fluent in French. Let’s hope this useful book will be translated in English (and other languages) someday.

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