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Review of *FoodWISE: a Whole Systems Guide to Sustainable and Delicious Food Choices* by Gigi Berardi

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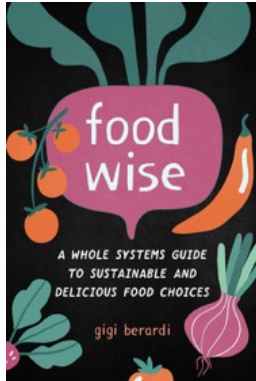
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BOOK REVIEW

FoodWISE: A Whole Systems Guide to Sustainable and Delicious Food Choices, by Gigi Berardi, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2020, 243pp., ISBN 9781623173913.



FoodWISE is a masterpiece to be read by everyone, despite initially appearing as the ramblings of a confused eater appearing to rank food beliefs over food knowledge. *FoodWISE* is an invitation to return to the joys of gardening and cooking. Teaching the reader not to take food for granted, the author moves the discussion beyond inflexible black and white positions in an effort to reflect upon and understand the grey. By the end of the book, Dr. Gigi Berardi's seemingly common-sense approach had led this reviewer to a new appreciation that food knowledge concerns everyone, implicit in every moment of our lives, from the first cry of a new-born baby for its mother's breast to the dying man's last morsel.

Berardi combines her role as a professor at Western Washington University's Huxley College of the Environment in Bellingham, Washington where she teaches classes on food and geography, with that of a small-scale farmer and cheesemaker. Given this academic and practical background, *FoodWISE* is a guide to making better choices from the plethora of ever-changing and deliberately misleading information readily available across all media. We live in a culture awash with advice on nutritional intake, yet do not appear to understand what it really means to eat healthily. *FoodWISE* is for anyone who has experienced the stress of deciphering what food labels say, and if they say what they actually mean.

The early pages of *FoodWISE* do not inspire, offering, at best, a random chronology of food misadventures from Nairobi, through to Nicaragua and Thailand, without apparent connection other than illness. This is followed by various kitchen misadventures, and by the non-sequitur, "caring deeply about food need not mean hours in the kitchen and a high grocery bill." Matters quickly improve. Berardi set herself a personal and professional goal to experience food in all its aspects, from seed to plate. She chronicles her experiences as a teacher and writer whose purpose is to

share with readers different ways of experiencing food. Conscious, experience-based thinking is an important part of *FoodWISE* guidelines. Drawing on Steve Ettlinger's work on Twinkies, Berardi describes the reality of food manufacturing with its conveyor belts and reinforced tanks designed to hold mould fighting sorbic acids as well as petroleum, and naturally derived colourings. The result is that despite an impressive use of ingredients, environmental resources, technologies, and labour, very little wholesome food is actually delivered to the consumer in the end product.

FoodWise guidelines are not presented in a uniform manner but sprinkled throughout the book. They are advisory and helpful, not prescriptive. Berardi advises the reader to think things through, taking advantage of the wealth of reasonable information available. *FoodWISE* is about the experiential learning that expands understanding of the entire food system from production, processing, preparing, serving, and eating. Discussion then turns to the need for environmentally responsible waste management, as this issue can't be considered in isolation from its impact on the depletion of natural resources and potential impact on climate change. To address this, future food production systems must be as focused on sustainably managing our natural resources as on increasing production. As the primary goal of food production systems should be to nourish human beings, the *FoodWISE* approach reflects this new reality in its combining of values and economics. The method is to stop - think - then act; consider all the factors at play and then make informed decisions.

The industrial food system, with its profit-maximising ethos, is not achieving the goal of producing wholesome food, despite producing excess food. On the contrary, this system is the main driver of malnutrition, and environmental degradation on the planet. Nonetheless, food systems play a double role as Nature's steward. Determining the role food systems will play depends very much on the ideas we have about food fit for human consumption. The dominant narrative of the industrial food system considers food as a tradeable commodity where value is determined by profitability. This narrative was disseminated initially by academics, who largely favoured commodification over food commons or public good. Berardi seeks to understand how academia has explored value-based considerations of food as commodity and private good (which she identifies as a hegemonic narrative) compared to considerations of food as commons/public good.

FoodWISE considers what humans consume, keeping the factors of personal budgets, values, and tastes in mind. The author mixes the academic with the practical as she describes her personal food experiences growing up with an American mother and Italian father. She questions whether the entities in the food-chain think holistically throughout the entire food system. She claims that personal experience helps make sense of food information and reports of scientific findings. This is perhaps valid, but not the whole story. Being *FoodWISE* doesn't require knowing every environmental fact about food, but requires a healthy curiosity, even scepticism, with regard to the many insidious claims made by big agri-business about the foods on offer.

It means viewing food differently, and asking questions about it; for example, how strange it is to expect a kiwi, a ripe avocado, or a sweet orange out of season?

This book encourages mindful eating, which in turn leads to mindful living, to recognising where our food comes from and encouraging consumers towards procurement from environmentally sustainable sources.

Structurally, the book is divided into four parts: part one covers our shared world of food and farming, concluding that humans need to take the steps necessary to ensure a sustainable, secure food supply underpinned by policies that support resilience. Part two suggests that being *FoodWISE* encourages making unprocessed or whole food choices, because what we eat determines our impact on the planet, our communities and ourselves. In part three Berardi reviews the web of interdependent activities involved in providing whole food; growing, processing, selling, and consuming. She goes on to discuss the bad boys of fats and sugars, linking this to part four with examples of recipes encouraging “informed decision making.” Questions are raised about making informed choices when purchasing our food, indicating that many of our choices are influenced by food advertising and family beliefs about food rather than based on food knowledge.

Frequently each day we are informed about food via the media. Many questions are raised in *FoodWise*: Whom to believe? Why? How to inform ourselves? How do we become *FoodWISE*?

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