

BOOK REVIEW

Our wealth of food – most of it unhealthy

BY PAUL K. HAEDER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

For more than 15 years, Michele Simon has helped expose the nefarious marketing, political and psychological tools used by corporations and groups such as McDonald's, PepsiCo, Anheuser-Busch and the Grocery Manufacturers Association. As a public health lawyer and founder of Eat Drink Politics, a consulting firm that helps

individuals and government agencies wage food policy campaigns, taking on such behemoths has shown her how their actions threaten public health and food justice.

"Most people don't have a say where their food is produced or where it's grown," Simon said in a recent interview focused around her 2006 book, "Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back."

Appetite for Profit - How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back by Michele Simon

Simon's book is required reading by many in the field of food politics, nutrition and food security planning, an area of study associated with many university urban planning departments, including the University of Washington.

"Our food is tightly controlled by a small group of CEOs who do not have communities' interests in mind. The problem is that food isn't a commodity. ... Food is an essential human need like water, land and air, and these corporations have co-modified it for profit."

"Appetite" is just as relevant now as it was when released – maybe more so, with recent statistics revealing one in every four American children suffer from hunger, and 30 percent of American families – 49 million people – often go without meals.

"We're seeing the time-honored tradition of the right wing blaming the individual. What's taking center stage in the food realm



is distracting from what's really going on," Simon said. "Nobody's saying there isn't shared responsibility for unhealthy eating, but we have to provide options for people."

Options in the form of healthy, low-cost food that's culturally relevant have been shunted away by the food industry through political malfeasance, and she emphasizes that it's not just about telling kids or parents to turn off the TV or just say no to McNuggets. Marketing bad food to children, Simon professes, is the key to our nation's unhealthy youth.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 17 percent of children and adolescents are obese. The CDC also noted that for these young people, being overweight or obese was the result of "caloric imbalance" – too few calories expended for the amount of calories consumed – and was affected by various genetic, behavioral and environmental factors.

Simon cracks open that last point, caloric imbalance, which the CDC fails to tie to the marketing and lobbying of the food and beverage (and factory farming) industries.

Her book points out some deeply

troubling trends over the past 50 years, with the U.S. food system becoming increasingly controlled by an ever-dwindling number of people who care little about nutrition or environmental and community well-being. She delves into the strategies of taste factories, and how the denaturing process of bringing fat, sugar and salt to the palettes of more Americans has ruled our collective diets. "Most people live in neighborhoods where there are no healthy produce options," she said. "In this economic downturn, it's very difficult for a majority of families to get healthy food."

"Appetite" pulls back the veil on how McDonald's and PepsiCo got their talons in our children, thanks to a Faustian bargain of allowing these companies to distribute junk food and beverages to struggling school districts, as well as letting them advertise their subsidiaries such as Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and KFC. And Simon details the influence Kraft Foods, Coca-Cola, Safeway, ConAgra and other U.S.-owned corporations have on Capitol Hill, which has turned obesity into a global epidemic: 1.5 billion people worldwide are waging the battle of the bulge.

And there's more.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association has more than 140 members, representing every major food manufacturer, and combined sales of more than \$680 billion. The GMA opposes any state bill or citizens initiative calling for the restriction of the sale of junk food or soda in schools. Then there's the other NRA – the National Restaurant Association – with 60,000 companies controlling more than 300,000 dining establishments. This group doesn't want nutritional information of foods available to consumers.

Two more heavyweights Simon brings down to earth are the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF) and American Council for Fitness and Nutrition (ACFN). The former is a lobbying engine for the restaurant, food, beverage and alcohol industries for political campaigns that calls medical and health professionals, parents' groups and lawyers like Simon "food cops." The latter creates industry-friendly "articles" in both the academic press and commercial media. The corporate backing of those authors is usually left out of the byline.

Simon sees all of this as an industry-funded battle for the country's health, one where fruit and vegetable prices have gone up 40 percent since 1980, while junk food prices have gone down 40 percent. "It's not a level playing field because parents and food and nutrition advocacy groups are up against their unlimited marketing budgets," she said.

Simon advocates a whole food, plant-based diet, and this war, which she's been fighting for more than 15 years, is not about the heirloom tastes of foodies or the locavore movement. She sees it as the unfair pricing strategies of these three industries and the power of branding.

"The irony is the McDonald's brand is so powerful that if the McDonald's logo was associated with organic carrots," she said, "kids would eat organic carrots."

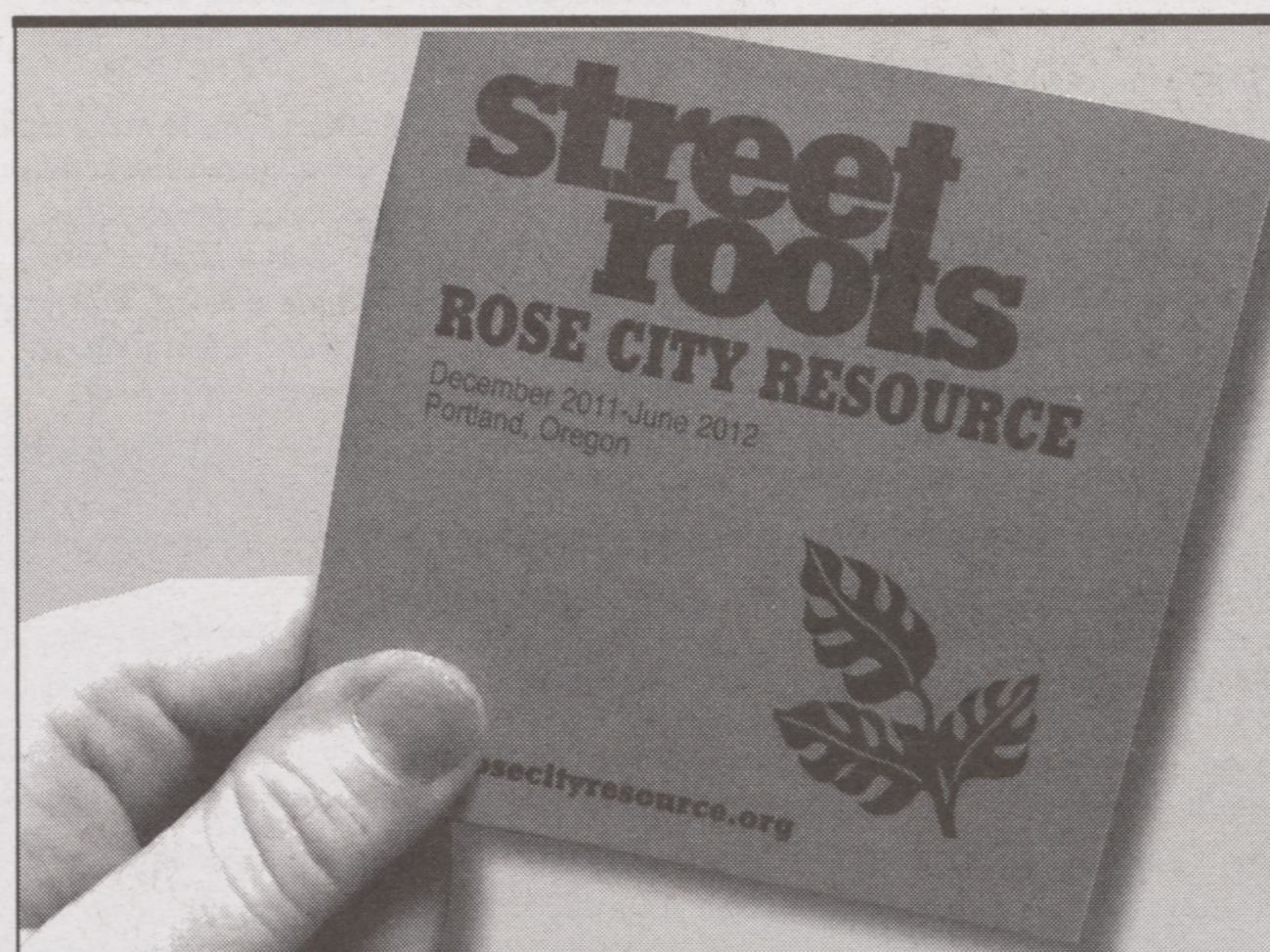
Rosette Royal is the assistant editor for Real Change, Street Roots sister paper in Seattle, Wash. Reprinted from Real Change News.

Alone

By Jason Wolf

I yell out at the top of my lungs
My screams fall upon deaf ears
The sound of my echo makes me feeble
I stop and listen to the thunderous silence
My heart is racing on all four legs
I breathe deep and hard as if sedated
I feel the desolation
course through my veins
I grow cold in my isolated winter

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