



HISTORY

McDonaldization and the Future of Fast Food

An interview with Andrew F. Smith.

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Andrew Smith, a teaching associate professor of food studies at the New School in New York City, is the author of many food books, most recently *Fast Food: The Good, the Bad and the Hungry*, a history of fast food. In the era of zero-waste, local-first, and ugly-fruit-is-good movements, we asked him about the state of the sort of places that serve factory meat meals on deep discount.

What's the future of fast food?

It's not going away. Period. Right now it's not growing as rapidly as it once did in the United States but in other countries, it's expanding rapidly. There are

over five thousand KFCs in China, with twenty thousand projected.

Fast food isn't just McDonald's and Burger King and KFC anymore. There's now a vegetarian restaurant chain. There's a vegan restaurant chain. There's Roy Choi [and Daniel Patterson], who's opened good quality fast food restaurants in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. The model works; it makes no difference if you're serving burgers or chicken or pizza or healthy food.

The issues that face fast food now are health, labor, and supplier issues. I don't think any restaurant chain wants to be associated with illnesses—it's not in their self interest. Quality issues are going to help change the industry. A number of companies are now hyping cage-free eggs and no gestation crates for their hogs.

In terms of labor, everybody should be in favor of fast food workers getting fifteen dollars an hour. First, that's the real cost of the food, and people who are buying it should be aware of that. Second, 52 percent of fast food workers are on government assistance, of which the vast majority is food aid. And in addition to that, the salaries of the CEOs are millions and millions. Denmark pays twenty dollars an hour in fast food restaurants. Do the McDonald's in Denmark make the same amount of money as they do here? No. But they make a profit.

But labor issues are more than just pay. Increasing evidence says that many people who work in fast food restaurants are undocumented. They can't complain if there are problems with pay or injuries that occur. If I were a fast food worker and I were sick I would come to work, because if you don't come to work you're not paid.

Supplier issues need to get on the agenda more. Where do you get the beef? Where do you get eggs? To what extent is McDonald's responsible for labor conditions at meat packing facilities? One of the most dangerous jobs in America is working at a meat packing facility.

I believe that fast food is by far the most influential culinary trend of our time. Not organic food, not local food, not slow food—all those things are important and they need to be within a context, but what's influenced life and what's influenced what we eat is fast food. It's the number one global phenomenon.

Is that why you wrote the book?

I've been fascinated with fast food ever since I was a child. My first time at McDonald's in 1955—there was nothing like it. I'd been to hamburger places;

the guys wore filthy clothes, and it took fifteen minutes for them to make the food. McDonald's was white, glass all over, young men—there were no women at that point—running around the place. They pressed a clock when you made your order, and within sixty seconds guaranteed they delivered your food. You put your order in one place, walked over to the other window, and it was there. That phenomenon was fascinating to me as a child.

Later on, I lived in San Bernardino, and I went to the original McDonald's. It's nothing like what you think of McDonald's; it was a small drive-in, dumpy at that point. But as I started to do research, I realized that what we think of as the fast food industry today really started there. Yes, there were fast food chains before that. But everybody—Burger King, KFC—followed the McDonald's model from that point on, or they improved upon it or altered it. In-N-Out Burger looked at the model and did something different—they thought efficiency was important, but they wanted to have better quality. But they looked at the model first.

Why was that model so effective?

It was at the right time at the right place, and it was Ray Kroc. Without Ray Kroc, the McDonald brothers would have failed. They were nice people, and they ran a good shop, and they created an efficient model, but they had no idea how to franchise it. Ray Kroc knew they needed to target where they put outlets. He saw where suburbs were being built, and put McDonald's there.

At the time, America was becoming suburban. People had jobs, the economy was flourishing, and families were moving to the suburbs. There were no restaurants, no grocery stores, no food establishments whatsoever.

McDonald's targeted people who didn't have a lot of money and were not epicures—people who typically consumed most of their meals at home. All of a sudden, they were in a place where they people didn't have families, and where people didn't have easy access to restaurants. McDonald's came along—it was cheap, tasty food, convenient and fast, and you didn't have to clean up afterwards or go out shopping beforehand.

It was an efficient model, right for the times. As they got larger, McDonald's was able to negotiate with suppliers to keep a lower price. They prevented unions from forming, so they didn't have to pay their workers much. They didn't need a professional chef because everybody is interchangeable; they didn't need carhops or waitresses.

As the times changed the model changed along with it. Like them or not, all I can do is sit back and marvel at how McDonald's has been able to adapt and adopt.

How has McDonald's changed?

Fast food has become a global phenomenon. That's what was most surprising and fascinating to me. In America, I can understand how it grew from one point to another. I can understand how it developed where American troops were, in Okinawa, Japan, and in Germany. But I'm shocked by how and why it developed rapidly in other developed countries like Australia and New Zealand, and the real surprise was, over the last twenty-five years, its growth in developing world.

McDonald's is market differently in developing countries. It's not cheap. They're selling it as an American experience. It uses a very different model to succeed in India and Africa and the Middle East. Obviously they don't serve beef in India or pork in the Middle East. They figure out what flavor profiles people like. They have some things that are consistent, but there will be a lot of other things you get, too. It's a global operation with local standing.

What makes a restaurant still a McDonald's if it contains so many different elements?

McDonald's in the United States is not the same as McDonald's in India, but there are lots of consistencies. The extremely efficient operation is exactly the same model—they just alter the food. What's the difference if you're serving a hamburger or a hot dog or spaghetti? As long as it's tasty to the local population and relatively inexpensive, people will eat it.

The other part is that the American model has been adopted and adapted in other countries to create their own chains, like Mos Burger in Japan, or Jollibee in the Philippines. Jollibee, for example, is now much larger in the Philippines than McDonald's. They've expanded into Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and a few states in the US. I look at that and say, how could you ever have expected something like that to happen? Well, it's because Jollibee follows the same model. They looked at that model and said, that's exactly what we're going to do, and that's how they rapidly expanded. They may be Filipino food, but it's the same thing.

Is it really eating Filipino food if you go to Jollibee? Well, if you go to McDonald's, is that eating American food? Yeah, a little, but not exactly the way all Filipinos eat. But it's a taste.

Do you think culture drives food or vice versa?

The fast food industry changed how we eat. My family never went out to eat. The family meal was something relatively sacred. We would get together at six

o'clock at night and have dinner. We talked about politics, we talked about family business, we talked about anything. Today, my daughter, who I love very much, has four children, and they have no dinner. Each kid comes in, goes to the refrigerator, gets something.

That change might have nothing to do with fast food. It might have to do with the pace of life. But it seems to me that fast food has genuinely changed what we eat. Were people ready for that? Yes. But it certainly changed eating culture.

50 percent of the total amount of money Americans spend is on food and going out to eat, which would never have been the case even thirty years ago. That means you don't have to go shopping, you don't have to prepare food. You don't have to eat with other people. You don't have to clean up afterwards. You just eat, gulp, and go.

FAST FOOD, GLOBALIZATION, JOLLIBEE, MCDONALD'S