'Hamburgers in Paradise' review: We are what we eat

(AAP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

By Special to The Oregonian

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HAMBURGERS IN PARADISE

Louise O. Fresco
Princeton University Press, $39.50

576 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

In Canada, where a hamburger, French fries, and a coke is called "the holy trinity," advertisers once claimed "There's a little McDonald's in everyone." After all, we are, to no small extent, what we eat. As Louise Fresco, the president of Wageningen University and Research Center in The Netherlands, reminds us, the burger has replaced the apple as the universal symbol of food, telling a story of temptation and sin, abundance, status, technological innovation and, "a new consciousness of responsibility for the earth."

An informative examination of how food is produced and consumed, Fresco's *Hamburgers in Paradise: The Stories Behind the Food We Eat* [http://www.powells.com/book/hamburgers-in-paradise-the-stories-behind-the-food-we-eat-9780691163871/1-0] aspires to move beyond "the shallow thinking" and widespread social insecurity about fertilizers, genetic modification, "natural" foods, organic livestock farming, biodiversity, and sustainability. There are no easy answers to the real threats to the food supply, especially climate change, Fresco acknowledges. That said, Fresco is optimistic: technology, she maintains, can make sufficient food of reasonable quality available to all, while societies assume shared responsibility to weigh the costs as well as the benefits.

Even-handed and judicious, "Hamburgers in Paradise" does not present bio-technology and genetic modification as panaceas. Fresco recommends testing, regulation and constant monitoring. But she makes a compelling case that they have played a positive role in food production. Organic farming, she notes, has lower yields, puts more land (stripped of its natural vegetation) in cultivation, and makes no contribution per unit of production to greenhouse gas emissions or saving water; the use of animal manure instead of artificial fertilizer adds to the risks of spreading bacterial infection. More often than not, then, organic farming "merely" fills a niche market for higher-income groups.

"Natural," Fresco emphasizes, does not necessarily mean benign or better. Fresh milk can be a source of cancer, artificial strawberry extract has decided advantages over the real thing, which requires a great deal of herbicides, and fungicides. Pre-packaged, washed lettuce doesn't last as long as a whole head, but fact — wash the product than consumers use in their kitchens.

By "dominating nature," human beings have produced enough food to feed billions of people and cause "The question we face," Fresco concludes, is how to find the right balance, "just like the balance between doom-mongering" and heedless and headlong faith in technology. Our current crisis of confidence, Fresco much in psychology and politics as in science. Reforms should be small (not printing supermarket recei
kilometers of paper strips each year in The Netherlands) and large (alternatives to fossil fuels). Above all, grounded in knowledge, not nostalgia for a paradise that never was.

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