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Jerusha Klemperer:

For well over a century, the hot dog has been the quintessential dirt cheap, flavorful, all American meal, a kind of meaty blank slate you can slather your regional preferences onto like slaw, chili, relish or onions, but can a person who cares about what they're eating and the impact their food has on the environment and animals and meat packing workers eat a hot dog in good conscience? How about four or five hot dogs every day? In this episode, we speak to the writer who did just that all to tell us the story, good, bad, and ugly of this handheld feast. Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of foodprint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people.

We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for. I'm here with Jamie Loftus, who is a comedian, a podcaster, and an author of a book that's still pretty recent. I might be a little behind the curve here, but a recent book called Raw Dog: The Naked Truth About Hot Dogs. And I love that you describe yourself in the book as a hot dog reporter with nothing to lose.

Jamie Loftus:

I mean, there's only so many of us.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's the thing. I was like, are there hot dog reporters with something to lose?

Jamie Loftus:

There's one guy named Bruce. I think that he would have something to lose, but only because he's been at it way longer than I have. Yeah, all I have to lose is my, I think actually now what I do have to lose is my friendships in the professional eating community.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Okay. So you set out during that first Covid summer that we could all be out in the world again, 2021 traveled around the country hitting the best hotdog joints in town and maybe some of the less best and everything from baseball stadiums to the Coney Island Hot Dog Eating Contest. So what made you want to write a book about hot dogs or this particular book about hot dogs?

Jamie Loftus:

There has been a lot of writing about hot dogs. I think at this point I've read most of it, but the reason I wanted to write this book is because I had never seen hot dogs written about in the way that I wanted to read about them. Where what I was finding was well written and well done, but it was either about how hot dogs are great and here's a list of them that are delicious, or it was the exact opposite. And why hot dogs are a pestilence to the earth and not a source of joy.

And I think that there are, it's so funny because I was like, I weirdly feel like I come off as like we need bipartisanship in the hot dog discussion community, which is not generally my vibe, I promise. But I wanted to have those discussions happening alongside each other and I hadn't seen that anywhere before. And I was coming out of making a series of podcasts about hyperspecific issues and the first topic I was rejected on was hot dogs, where they were like, "Okay, you've pushed your luck one too many

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times. Please be serious." And so I took the idea instead to a publisher, and I think it was a really cool match. I loved my editors Alli so much and we yeah, we got to kind of build out a book that didn't exist yet, which I didn't know still could happen.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yes, it felt unique in that way for sure. And making a podcast like this, my friends are constantly bemoaning that I'm ruining certain foods for them. One of my friends pleaded with me like, "Please don't come for peanut butter and jelly. I need it." And probably most meat eaters would feel that way about hot dogs. Right. They don't want to know how they're made and they don't want to have to give them up because they bring joy to a lot of people, as you said. Thanks to you, I watched a YouTube video, How It's Made Hot Dogs,-

Jamie Loftus:

Oh, boy.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can't say that I,-

Jamie Loftus:

Sorry about that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Recommend it, but for the listeners, if you want, you can check it out. It reveals the technical mechanics, a few of which were surprising to me, but can you start with the basics since you're an expert now? What constitutes a hot dog? What is it? What's in it? How's it made? And I know you have opinions too about sort of the preparation after, what it's served in, with, et cetera. What's a hot dog?

Jamie Loftus:

Yes. Wow. Deceptively complicated question. So a hot dog as far as I'm concerned is, it is a sandwich. It's not a sausage. A sausage is slightly different. There is a less fine grind to the meat. It is more processed. You tend to, if you're having a classic hot dog, it doesn't cost a lot of money. The ingredients that are inside of it can vary pretty significantly and still be a hot dog. You've got chicken, pork, Turkey, beef and vegan and vegetarian options. These all fall under the beautiful umbrella that is hot dog, but it is a finely processed and cured meat in ways that in the book I get into ways that are often diabolical, the ways in which they become affordable. But as far as a hot dog goes, yeah, a hot dog is not a sausage. It is a sandwich. And I think that there is a hot dog for everyone that can feel and taste good. That is my mission, that is my word to spread.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. By the way, that was one of the revelations for me from How It's Made Hot Dogs or whatever the title of that is, was the chicken, that even when you're eating like a beef dog or a pork dog or whatever, like there's chicken in there.

Jamie Loftus:

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There's almost always chicken in there. And there's also, I mean this is most popular in the DC, Baltimore area, but there's also half-and-half. There's a lot of half pork, half beef dogs or half beef, half chicken dogs. And I mean the taste, it took a while for me to have to train significantly tasting the difference because there is also a sameness to a lot of hot dogs, which I think is kind of what can make it a very comforting dish. But yeah, almost any kind of meat can be a hot dog. I've seen it pushed to the limits of octopus, which I'm tempted to reject, but I've seen others except carrot dogs. I feel like carrot dog, a roasted carrot dog in a hot bun, ooh. Really, really beautiful stuff. Has nothing to do with hot dogs, but spiritually is. There's all these exceptions.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Absolutely. Well, your book touches on many of the problematic aspects of industrial meat production, some of which were really highlighted during those early months of the Covid pandemic. Can you talk us through what we learned, what you learned about meat packing plants and slaughterhouses and meat companies during that time? What came to light?

Jamie Loftus:

So there was a lot of really thoughtful reporting that it was really interesting as I was writing this in the back half of 2021 into early 2022 to reflect on a time that I think many people memory holds a little bit. And going back to like, I clearly remember in April 2020 then President Trump making an executive order that meat packing factories were going to stay open because meat is important to Americans and blah, blah, blah. And there's just this really broad nationalistic talk. I remember seeing the wave of press of here's why that could be extremely dangerous, not only from the myriad animal rights issues that already exist in these plants, but the labor issues, which is something I knew less about. I was fairly well versed in what the harms and the violations towards animals were in these processes. But I didn't know how the employees were treated alongside those processes.

And so I remembered that and then I kind of didn't remember hearing about it again because there were 40 million things that were going wrong. And I feel like that story kind of flew under the radar if you weren't actively keeping up on it. But there was, at meat processing plants across the US, there was I think at one point it was the second most dangerous job in the US to have with a number of fatalities. Behind working in a hospital, it was the most dangerous job that you could be doing. From a labor perspective, I got the chance to kind of go back and see how jobs in meat packing in mid-century were far more secure because the unions were secure, but the unions weakened over time, partially because of new laws being passed that slowly but surely chipped away at them, and also because of the union's failures to keep up with overcoming language barriers and understanding who they were serving.

And so by the time 2020 came around, the unions are significantly weakened. The unions often are not able to communicate with migrant workers who are working within these factories. And the factories themselves are working with the government in a way that, I mean, and this reporting didn't come out until I think early 2022, and I had to go back when this ProPublica report came out and be like, okay, I'm very grateful it was released before the book came out because there was later unsurprising, but damning evidence that the Trump administration basically gave the meat packing industry carte blanche. There are internal memos where meat packing executives at Tyson are essentially drafting the executive order that we end up hearing in April 2020. It couldn't be a more nakedly capitalistic endeavor.

And then communication from the top down within these meat packing companies that are basically just like, it's okay if you don't require people who have tested positive for Covid to stay home. They still have to come into work. And that resulted in a number of deaths. And the frustrating thing is even though this

reporting was done, it hasn't really moved the needle very much in what the day-to-day at a meat packing is even post vaccine. So sorry, that was long-winded. But yeah, I was shocked and frustrated that I knew about this story, but so much continued to happen and the national conversation had shifted in all these other directions and a way from really vulnerable workers who needed and deserved our attention.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, and it's one of the many stories about industrial meat that I certainly feel as a person trying to get this story out there, you have to tell again and again and again and they're little, you got Upton Sinclair and it's all the way to you, to the present, and it's a story that you just have to keep waving the flag.

Jamie Loftus:

I had this sort of possibly dilution of grandeur where I was like, oh, I want to go work in a meat packing plant and do some onsite reporting, but that even now is, you can't even really do that now because of how ag laws are limiting the ability to even carry information from within to without. And I don't know. Yeah. That whole several weeks I was working on that chapter where, as you know, because you've been waving the flag, it just so discouraging to see how things have arguably regressed in the last 100 years.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yep. And that wasn't the only labor issue you discovered or touched on in the book. It was, you really laid it out very well that repeatedly throughout your journey you kept encountering signs in various hot dog establishments that you visited that said basically, sorry for the slow service or sorry for limited seating or sorry for this, that or the other. It's just nobody wants to work. And you rightfully call that out. Can you talk about those signs and what was going on that summer?

Jamie Loftus:

Yeah, I mean it was an interesting, for a lot of reasons, it was an interesting summer to be traveling because there was this feeling of like, is this okay? Can we even do this? And yeah, as we were going across the country, going to majority, like something I genuinely love about the hot dog expanded universe is that unlike most popular American foods, it hasn't really been food chained to death. There's not a lot of chains that are associated with hot dogs. So you can go on a trip where you are mostly visiting small businesses where maybe there's two or three locations, but usually not even that. So it was interesting to get a specific taste of how each location was dealing with what was not then called, but is now called the Great Resignation in mid 2021, which was powered by younger working class workers who throughout the pandemic realized that they were getting better benefits in a more secure living on unemployment than they were going to low wage jobs where they felt that they were not being treated well, they weren't being paid adequately and were being exploited.

And so by the summer of 2021 when the vaccine rolled out and many people were encouraged to return to work, many didn't because they were like of all of the major social safety net failures that were laid bare throughout lockdown, there were young workers that were like, I refuse to be treated this poorly. I'm not going to go back. I'm going to find another way to make a living. And so what that came out with, which the tricky balance there is I completely understand how a small business owner is really hurt by that and how that does make it harder to run your business, but the tone of that would often be angry towards the workers rather than angry towards the system that brought this very valid and I think radical

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realization out in the workers because everyone's just trying to get through the day to day. So they're like, no, I'm mad at the 22-year-old. I'm not mad at the system oppressing the 22-year-old. And I was sort of seeing that again and again throughout the summer.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, and it also touches on this issue that comes up on our podcast a lot, which is around the true cost of food. Right. So you mentioned at the beginning a hot dog is cheap or it should be, but part of the issue, right, is when we talk about what happens at the plants, whether it's to the animals or to the workers, when we talk about how much a small business owner is able to pay their young hourly employee, it's got to be really little all along the chain to get to a place where at the end you have a meal that can cost \$2 or whatever it is.

Jamie Loftus:

Right. Exactly. Yeah. And so that's, like I was hoping, like ideally, hopefully did balance in the book that to not make out small business owners to be the villain of this story. It's certainly not them, and it's not necessarily a small business owner's fault that they're not able to pay their employees more, but it's like if that is the issue, what is the step above that? What is the step above that? And it comes down to our small businesses are not being supported enough. It's like if it's the only way to be a successful business is to not pay a living wage, then you're not a successful business.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I think you succeeded in that. There was a lot of nuance in your critiques and a lot of hands up at the air kind of gesturing around at our crazy world. How did we get here?

Jamie Loftus:

Yeah. Yeah, I mean at some points it's like it's [inaudible 00:18:01] because I very much wanted to write about these labor issues, but then when it comes to, I don't know, like I read a lot of nonfiction and the last chapter is always like, to any nonfiction book about anything, the last chapter is like, and here's the call to action and here's what we do, and here's step one to making a better world. And I just could not find it in me to write that chapter because I'm like, I don't know. To some extent, I feel like the talking about it is the step that I would hope that people take because I don't know. I mean, and speaking to your show about finding more ethical ways to enjoy this dish, which I do believe is possible, whether you're a meat eater or not, there are ways, and I've been encouraged by small business owners I've talked to who are passionate about that same issue.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Oh, one other labor issue that I just recently read a piece that was sort of unearthing all of this prison labor in the food chain, and actually a major hot dog brand was implicated in that as using prison labor. And I was like, oh my God, we'll just add one more labor issue.

Jamie Loftus:

Wow, I have not seen, I mean, God,-

Jerusha Klemperer:

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I'll send you a link.

Jamie Loftus:

I'm not surprised, but please, yes. I was like, I bet, is it Tyson, is it Smithfield? It's always one of those two sickos.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's not the name they use, but maybe they own this brand.

Jamie Loftus:

They own them all.

Jerusha Klemperer:

They own them all.

Jamie Loftus:

I always think about, I think the most effective, although it was fairly censored, the most effective, at least within subcategory hot dogs protest against the practices within the meat packing industry was in 2022 at the Nathan's Hot Dog Contest where you have the Darth Vader protester coming out holding a sign saying Kill The Smithfield Death Star. And he got cut away from, but I support him. I support his fight. I thought that was one of the coolest things I've ever seen on TV, ever.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I love it. Okay, so you correctly call the hot dog deeply American, and the book really is an exploration of American culture and history and kind of where hot dogs have intersected with those issues and with some of the really important moments in recent and further back history, they're inextricably woven into the fabric of this country and into all of this country's problems. And you really touch on that, labor issues, as we've discussed, animal welfare issues, environmental issues, racism. We've talked about labor. What are some of the other unsavory truths that people might not know about hot dogs?

Jamie Loftus:

One of the issues I really was hoping to get into, and there was way more than I even imagined was, because I mean, I wanted to understand the production of the hot dog. I wanted to understand how it gets, like what about it made it American? And I really loved and was simultaneously frustrated by the marketing story behind the hot dog because the answer about what makes a hot dog American, nothing, basically nothing, but it is not rooted in any food traditions indigenous to here. It is not very American at all. What I think really makes it American is the fact that it is a huge success of marketing, which feels like a very American thing. And going in early, one of the most helpful books I read was called Hot Dog by Bruce Kraig, who is the hot dog writer with something to lose. And he did a great brief history of how the hot dog sort of became the, all of the various myths around how the hot dog was created.

And as I was going through them, it just reminded me so much of how tech moguls sound when they talk about like, it was just me in a garage with a dream. And then you hear, like you read whatever the Walter Isaacson book that comes out about those same guys 20 years later, and it's like, well, it was actually like \$5 million investment from their parent, and really this other guy did it, and there was actually really 30

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people and there was never a garage, and this guy was mean. All the origin stories that you hear also applied to hot dogs where there are all these stories that are so goofy and I understand why they were successful because they're really potent. It's like really potent, the American dream narrative of one day a vendor was at a baseball game holding a sausage in a glove and thought, surely there's a better way to deposit this meat tube to the masses.

And it's ridiculous and they've all been debunked. But I think that that's really interesting where it was, and because it became popular in the early 20th century as there was such a huge wave of immigration to the US and selling this dream was very important that the hot dog kind of fit very cleanly into that narrative of here is one ingenious person who made this happen, and now look at them. It's actually really great that they own a hot dog conglomerate because they deserve it, because the time they had a sausage in a glove. And the hot dog story has all the hallmarks of things that feel more immediately pernicious and scary. But it's a hot dog, it's silly. It's silly that all of these capitalistic rules also apply to hot dogs, but it's true.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, and then they become this, they are not, let's say, an origin American, but then they become this blank slate for every region, city, peoples, whatever, to turn them into their own regionally specific thing, which is very American, right?

Jamie Loftus:

Yeah. I mean, that's something that I really love about the hot dog is yeah, as I was traveling, you could feel the food traditions of wherever you are generally projected onto their signature hot dog. I live in the Southwest, I love an Arizona hot dog where you get a really good grilled bun, there's almost like a mayonnaise structure. You've got it split. It's incredible. Then you have novelty hot dogs where they're throwing SpaghettiOs on it, they're throwing onion rings on it. It's kind of a mess, but it's fun. There's ideas. You got hot dogs in the South where you get really deep into specific chili recipes, and I really enjoyed that. I wish they toasted their buns, but we'll circle back to that later. And then you have like most famously, you have the Chicago dog and that I have taken a lot of flack. I got booed at my own book release show in Chicago for being, I deserved it.

I came down too hard on the Chicago hot dog. It's not for me, but it is certainly distinct, and I think one of my favorite hot dogs in the East, you've got red snappers in Maine, which are a little weird to me if I'm being honest. But in Baltimore, there's this incredible hot dog that is just, I feel like really embodies what the original purpose with a hot dog was, which is to be cheap and be filling. And it is a lightly fried hot dog that is wrapped in lightly fried baloney. And if you have two bites of it, and I don't need to eat for six weeks. So I don't know. It's cool seeing the bougie hot dogs versus the clearly utilitarian hot dogs and the stands versus the brick and mortars and all the best hot dogs places I went to had burned down at least once. That is the hallmark of whether you know they're any good. So that's the fun part. Yeah.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I mean, you said you'll eat two bites and then you don't have to eat anymore again, but we all know you ate four other dogs that day.

Jamie Loftus:

For sure. For sure. Yeah.

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Jerusha Klemperer:

I mean, the sheer volume.

Jamie Loftus:

Yeah, health wise, not my summer. I had to kind of detox after that summer.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, speaking of volume eating, you devote a decent amount of time to the Coney Island Hot Dog Eating Contest, which I was very happy to see. You get into its history, including a seminal contest in the summer of 2007 when Joey Chestnut first speak Kobayashi. And I just have to jump in here to say that my whole body went electric when I got to this part because I was at the 2007 contest and I was a hot dog counter for one of the contestants.

Jamie Loftus:

What?

Jerusha Klemperer:

And as you're describing,-

Jamie Loftus:

Do you remember who?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yes. Hall Hunt.

Jamie Loftus:

That's so cool. Oh, I don't know him. That's so cool.

Jerusha Klemperer:

He only ate like 20 something hot dogs, so he was insignificant that day. But I stood,-

Jamie Loftus:

Who can blame him?

Jerusha Klemperer:

I stood, it was the craziest day, and just hearing you recount it as history was totally thrilling. I was like, that did happen. I was there and Kobayashi did throw up and then swallow again.

Jamie Loftus:

And then eat it.

Speaker 3:

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Chestnut comes back into the lead. Kobayashi falls to second. They're both now well over the record.

Speaker 4:

Kobayashi pausing now. Kobayashi pausing now. 39 seconds remain. This would be the greatest moment in the history of American sports if Chestnut can bring the belt home to Coney Island. It's been gone for nine years.

Jamie Loftus:

Truly, history is everywhere. I'm so jealous. I wish, oh God, what would I give to see Kobayashi eat the vomit? So awesome. Congratulations on having been there. That rocks. That's so cool.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Something happened to me that day, which was that I was really interested in Americana and kitsch and sort of where food intersects with all of those. And I was like, this is going to be the greatest day of my life. I cannot wait. I was like, how hilarious is it that these people eat a million hot dogs? And I have to say I was kind of traumatized because,-

Jamie Loftus:

Yeah.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The excess of it, the insanity of at the top, they made this announcement, like we've donated 4,000 hot dogs or however many it was,-

Jamie Loftus:

To public schools. Yeah.

Jerusha Klemperer:

To public schools to feed hungry children. And then they proceed to just like,-

Jamie Loftus:

It seems like a lateral move.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yes. And then we're just going to eat so many that we have to throw up, but then we'll swallow it again and nearly win the contest. I was just having so many feelings of repulsion and whatever, and you do a great job of recording that as well, your kind of revulsion at what you were seeing, but also you fell in love with Joey Chestnut that day. So it couldn't have been 100% revulsion.

Jamie Loftus:

Yes, I fully did fall in love with him, and now two years on, we'll see 2024, I've got high... I am now a fan of it too, where it's like I have to compartmentalize a lot of my personal beliefs to engage with it. But I really, oh, I love the contest so much. I think, and I may have seen Joey at the peak of his career, 76, he is

not hitting those numbers for the last two years, and it's because he shouldn't be able to. That was a game changing day. I always knew that was something that I needed to do in order to whatever, properly get the book done. But it was just, yeah, I mean, the excess of it is extremely alarming. The energy around the contest is slightly menacing. But at the same time, I feel like I look at how that contest is often portrayed in larger media and international media, and the takeaway is Americans are disgusting. And then I feel like this knee-jerk like, wait a second, those are some really nice people eating 50 hot dogs.

And so I wanted to, and I was lucky that last year I went back when I was doing my book tour last spring. The book came out in May, and then the contest is in July. I had a number of professional eaters who came on stage at events with me, and we would talk about it, and I learned a lot about how people get into it and ended up writing a story about two eaters that I really love that have these amazing personal stories where I think it's like the two things are true, like the excess is alarming and scary. And also I think it is tied into like this, I don't know, revulsion with Americans across the board when it's like there are really cool women competing in this contest. There are people who are not originally from America that are coming to this contest. And I mean, that's the Kobayashi story and how internally eaters are working to make it a more inclusive place to do something objectively disgusting. And I think that all the shades of gray in there are very, very interesting to me.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And I really learned a lot reading about that history. I had sort of frankly stopped paying attention to the contest after that. And I didn't realize, for example, that they started competing the men and women separately and sort of the kind of xenophobic narrative that the contest organizers had kind of pushed around that Kobayashi, Chestnut rivalry. I learned so much. I'm sure there are many differences between us, but one of them is that I could not bring myself to eat the free hot dog in the VIP section after the contest and you could.

Jamie Loftus:

I felt like, why are we here? Why are we here if I'm not eating the dog? And it was not good. It was brutal. It was cold.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You were like, I'm a connoisseur at this point and I know that this is bad.

Jamie Loftus:

It was a cold dog. Yeah, it was bad.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Not okay. Well, and this really sums up. In the book, you seem to be both disgusted by hot dogs and then truly in love with them. You eat four, five of them a day for a lot of those days. But what I want to know is, and this is what everyone here wants to know, because now we've maybe borderline ruined hot dogs for them just as I promised I wouldn't do. How do you know everything you know and keep eating hot dogs? I'm assuming you are still eating hot dogs.

Jamie Loftus:

I am. Not with as great frequency, but I am still eating hot dogs. I wish that I had a better answer to this. I was sort of assuming when I started writing this book that by the time it came out, I would not be eating hot dogs and I would not be eating meat at all. And I was hoping that that would be the case. And it did not. I mean, partially due to a lack of discipline on my part, but it didn't end up going that way. And I was kind of frustrated and kind of ashamed that that had not come to pass.

And the closest I can get to understanding it is the fact that the marketing really worked on me and untraining that, I mean, has been kind of a mother. It hasn't really happened. And I talk about this a little bit in the book, but just coming from a lower middle class family where hot dogs are a very, very viable option and just all of the memories I have attached to them from being a kid and the potency that food has to make you comfortable, which I found, and then going back to Trump issuing that horrific executive order in 2020, that that is something that is preyed upon of like, well, you need this because you grew up with this. And I've found it, and across a lot of work I've done, that you can have all of the answers and still, it's almost like a weirdly torturous thing where I have all of the information and yet I am still eating the hot dog. What is that? And I don't really have a great answer for it, but I know that it is way harder than I ever could've expected.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. Okay. So the book is hilarious. It's laugh out loud funny, which I rarely laugh out loud when I'm reading a book, but I did. But at the same time, there's something sad hanging over the whole endeavor. There's the specter of Covid, there's your dad's cancer, there's the police state, there's racism, there's your failing relationship, which you tell us right up front, you're traveling with your boyfriend, that that relationship will be over by the time the book is over. And then it just made me think, is there also something sad hanging over the enjoyment of any hot dog?

Jamie Loftus:

Ooh, that's a good question. I think that a hot dog, or at least as I've seen it, I originally had a chapter about hot dogs as they've been presented in TV and movies. And I do think that there's something very melancholy and contemplative about a hot dog. It is a meal for one, and you cannot share it really. And if you do, I don't know, it's a little gross. It gets pretty spitty. Yeah. I think that there is, I mean, like the issues that surround any low cost food, there's all of these moral quandaries that if you want to fully interact with a Costco hot dog, which is delicious, it's challenging to just fully endorse it. I couldn't do it. And I don't know, as someone that's eaten a lot of hot dogs alone, I can say that there's a real melancholy about the hot dog's aura. But I love her. I'm rooting for her.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Something you do deliver at the end of the book is like, okay, I know what the people want. The people want the list of the best hot dogs, which if people want to know that, they should go buy your book. Rather than those places, can you just describe what is the perfect hot dog? What's there? What did you love about those, I think it was five places you called out at the end?

Jamie Loftus:

Part of what, I mean, the hot dogs themselves obviously very, very important, but all of the places on that list also had a community feel that just felt so specific to where you were. The hot dogs that they served were important to the people that were eating them. And you don't get that in, I mean, along with a lot of other horrific things, you don't get that at a local food chain. I think about one of the hot

dogs I've really been evangelizing about recently that I think was in the book was it's a vegetarian hot dog that served at a bar in my neighborhood. And people love the hot dogs. They are delicious. But half of it is like you go and you meet up with your friend and you catch up and you eat this really good hot dog. And I think as lonely a dish as it could be everywhere that I recommended, I felt like didn't just have a solid hot dog. It also had a feeling of community and that it mattered in the place that it existed, which I think is really special.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Okay. Yeah. Speaking of vegetarian dogs, I wanted to ask you about vegan and vegetarian hot dogs and if they've gotten any better than they used to be.

Jamie Loftus:

I wouldn't consider myself an authority on vegan dogs. I would say in process. I think even in the last couple of years there have been, like it is way more common. I mean, and I live in southern California, so usually there is a solid vegetarian or vegan dog option, but some places still not. I feel like a lot of people associate vegan and vegetarian hot dogs with the Smart Dogs. Those are genuinely not good. There's no way around it. But I think from place to place, what I'm hoping is I've yet to see a Beyond hot dog. I'm hoping that that is somewhere that we can get to, that there's just a go-to, because part of why people get frustrated with the Smart Dogs is theoretically part of the hot dog appeal is you can go to the grocery store and get 12 of them for pretty cheap. And there's not quite a, as far as I know, a national solid vegetarian or vegan option that as a hot dog consumer would be so awesome because the Smart Dogs are genuinely quite challenging.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In the intro to the book, you say, "Think about how you feel about hot dogs right now, and let me know how you feel at the end. If it's exactly the same, I promise I won't write another one of these things." So you touched on this a little earlier, but what did you hope people would think or feel or do after reading this book, after getting this tour of our country through the lens of hot dogs?

Jamie Loftus:

Pretty modest goal. What I hoped, because what this journey did accomplish for me is to be more mindful about my own consumption because there was so much that I didn't understand about, particularly about meat packing and production. And if I am going to continue to eat meat, what is a more ethical way for me to do so? And so that is what I hope. And as I've talked with people who, and also I really have been overwhelmed and appreciated vegetarian and vegan support of this book because I was like, you guys really don't have to. I get it. But it's been really cool and I've gotten a lot of really great recommendations as well. But yeah, I think for me it's like there are inevitabilities that make it really, really difficult to avoid things like the hot dog.

If you're poor, if you're strapped for cash, whatever it is, the hot dog is going to be there for you. How can you find a way to interact with that reality in a way that feels better, in a way that is better for others? And so that's one thing. And then the other thing is I just really am interested in symbols that are not the symbols that people are used to seeing as such, because the hot dog is considered, it's so universal, but it's also kind of considered low class. And I was really interested in interrogating why that is and just have a better understanding of this symbol that I objectively do love. And now I feel like I love it in a different way.

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Jerusha Klemperer:

I was thinking that what I could ask you about is hot dogs. What do you like about hot dogs?

Speaker 5:

Well, what I like about hot dogs is that hot dogs are very yummy because if you put ketchup on it, chef's kiss. But to me, mustard on hot dogs is a little spicy. The bun, I think it's a little too bready for me, but I don't really like to eat the extras, so I just leave it behind. But then the inside of the hot dog, I would describe it like, same as a sausage, except a little more flavor in it and a little yummiier. The flavor is kind of like oil and sauce mixed together. It's very meaty, meaty in a good way.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and foodprint.org, which is a project of the GRACE Communications Foundation. Special thanks to Jamie Loftus. You can find us www.foodprint.org where we have this podcast, as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and lots of information about how to eat less meat, but better meat or no meat at all.