For all the things you can call Detroit, perhaps the most disheartening is its unofficial title of Food Desert Number One. Jobs come and go; public services like streetlights and snow plows, once gone, begin to seem like bourgeois accoutrements one can live without; a rash of break-ins drives you to purchase a loud and vicious dog. There is, in a way, room to negotiate. But there's something inescapably concrete about the prospect of living in a place where food is hard to find, a heft that brings the human experience down to the bones.

Foreign correspondent and food writer Anna Ciezadlo writes about the civilian experience of war as "a relentless accumulation of cants," going on to observe, "No matter what else you can't do, you still have to eat." Detroit is no abandoned city—its population of 714,000 still ranks it among the nation's largest urban centers—and Detroiters justifiably bristle at the comparison of their home with a war zone. Yet the city undeniably faces on a grand scale the hardships created by America's suburbanization and deindustrialization. It isn't war, but it bears a passing resemblance; whatever devastation may be found in Detroit says less about the people here than it does about the decisions made, and policies chosen, by the powerful on their behalf. Ciezadlo's maxim thus applies: Whatever problems it faces, Detroit still has to eat.

A decade ago, nobody had heard of a food desert; the term did not exist. The fact that some neighborhoods, usually poor ones, had far more liquor stores than supermarkets was so common it wasn't notable; it was just the way things were. Detroit could be seen as a city-sized version of the same trend, with supermarkets closing up shop as the city's economic prospects fell. By 2011, neither Walmart nor any other national grocery chain had a store within Detroit's city limits. The last Farmer Jack, a local chain operating as a subsidiary of A&P, closed its doors in 2007. For all this, Detroit does
Food access isn't measured by number of stores, but by how much square footage of grocery stores is available or how far you have to travel to get to one. On average, Detroit residents have about 25 percent grocery store space than the industry standard of three square feet per resident, a state of affairs shared by New Orleans and Washington, D.C.

There is one abundant option for Detroiter who live far from one of the city's supermarkets: the liquor store. Ninety-two percent of the stores that accept federal food coupons in Detroit are liquor stores, gas stations, drug stores, and other "fringe" retailers, and Detroiter spend their food stamps at them more frequently than their counterparts elsewhere. Every store in the food stamp program is required to carry a basic array of foodstuffs; many also join the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program (WIC), which has a more demanding grocery list to fill, requiring retailers to stock at least two kinds of fruits, two kinds of vegetables, and one whole grain cereal, as well as approved infant formula. In 2010, about 13 percent of all food stamps in Detroit were spent at convenience stores, a figure more than triple the national average. In local dialect, these shops are known as party tores, a term that references their preponderance of liquor, cigarettes, lotto, and junk food; the implications for relying on such shops as a food source are correspondingly grim. However much they redeem in food stamps, party stores rarely carry anything fresh, relying instead on products that can sit on shelves, unattended, for months without any threat of rotting.

Yet for years, convenience stores have been treated as the natural food supply for urban residents, while supermarkets were considered the feeding grounds for suburbanites. Supermarkets made a big splash in the 1930s, but they really took off when suburbanization took hold in the mid-twentieth century. Instead of walking to work and taking streetcars, people began driving big cars to larger homes with refrigerators and freezers, where they could store more food, especially fresh food. Our country's supermarkets were so emblematic of America's rising fortunes that when Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union visited the country in 1959, he famously included one in San Francisco on his itinerary.

Supermarkets were a showcase for America's industrial agriculture and abundance, but beneath the surface they were a system for distributing food. As they headed to the suburbs, supermarkets had to do more than sell food to housewives—they had to figure out how to bring food into communities that suddenly needed far more of it. They began to convince wholesalers to deliver to their stores and, over time, built their own distribution networks. They sought sites where they could build sprawling stores and parking lots cheaply, and looked for communities that were affluent and willing to drive, rather than working-class and inclined to walk. Every metric supermarket executives used to decide where to build a store was written with the suburbs in mind. Today, Detroiter reenact that exodus for much of their grocery shopping, heading outside the city to stock their kitchens and spending an estimated $200 million—nearly one-third of their grocery budgets—at suburban supermarkets each year. The food heads back to the city, but the profits generated by this $200 million stay outside the city limits.

Yet, if you talk to a marketing expert, the typical explanation for food deserts is a lack of demand, which is another way of saying there is nobody in the proposed market area who, well, eats. Really, what marketers mean is that there are either not enough people to support a supermarket—which, because it makes its money on volume, has to reach a certain level of sales—or that the people there are too poor, and won't generate enough sales. In the 1990s and early 2000s, supermarket executives told city planners in Chicago and New York that their stores would never be able to turn a profit in Manhattan's Harlem or Chicago's South Side; these weren't their markets or their customers. There were tens of thousands of shoppers, but the aver-
But as far as employers are concerned, I am no such thing. Wannabe workers are a dime a dozen and get treated accordingly. I’d lined up an interview at a supercenter out in the western exurbs, for produce, before I even got to town, but when I finish the interview on my second day in Michigan, I am surprised to find there is no instantaneous job offer, as had been the case before. I did just fine, says my initial interviewer, Randy, a sloppy, surprisingly young kid, but they have to do a background check and call my references, and they’ll let me know if I clear those hurdles next week—at which point they’ll schedule a third interview. Until then, I’m to wait. During the half-hour drive back to Detroit, where my steady speed of seventy-five miles an hour relegated me to slow lanes, it strikes me that expecting to walk into a job in the Detroit metro area in 2010 is naïve. The city’s unemployment rate stands at 14.7 percent, nearly 50 percent higher than the country’s as a whole. I am one tiny fish swimming in an ocean of applicants. This is going to take some time, dedication, and luck.

Chris’s house, and therefore my home, is technically in Hubbard Farms, but really, we live in Mexicantown. Mexican immigrants first came to Michigan around 1900, many of them working in sugar beet fields; some ended up in Detroit with industrial jobs. The Great Depression saw many return to Mexico, but as the midcentury economy flourished, jobs began drawing immigrants once again. Detroit lured people on a 2,500 mile journey with the promise of jobs at the sprawling factories built by Ford and Chrysler and in its cavernous steel plants; the intersection of Springwells Street and Vernor Avenue, west of Chris’s house, was the center of 1940s Mexican migration to the city. Chris’s father left behind a thriving Mexican ranch at twenty-one to come north, as much for adventure as for money in the 1950s, settling in to work at a steel plant a few years later. (The family began renting the duplex I’m living in somewhere around 1960, buying it in the 1980s.) Today, the plants here are silent and empty, like most of the industrial-age behemoths that dot the city. They sit along the neighborhood’s edge, monoliths of corrugated steel reaching skyward from asphalt prairies decaying around them, the relics of bars and diners that used to feed their workers shuttered for years.

Numerically speaking, I am an outlier but the last five to ten years have seen an influx of young, educated, and creative people moving to Detroit, drawn by its cheap rents, vast avail-
But that is the edge of the neighborhood, and both Mexicantown and Hubbard Farms have done a better job than most of the city in avoiding the heart-wrenching blight that's slowly been allowed to creep across Detroit since 1950. Two blocks west of my new home, families crowd Clark Park for soccer practice and playground visits in the evenings, with the Ambassador Bridge to Canada in the background. Two blocks north, up a street canopied with oaks and maples, a string of businesses dot West Vernor: a coffee shop, an ice cream parlor, a neighborhood development group, a bakery, a laundromat, a small grocer, and a taco truck. As elsewhere, there are arson-ravaged shells and boarded-up storefronts, apartment buildings with plastic-sheeted windows and shin-high grass, but they don't dominate. There are entire blocks where well-kept homes with mowed lawns and tidy gardens consistently line the street, though it of course says something about Detroit that such stretches are the kind of thing you mention rather than take for granted. The best thing about my new neighborhood, hands down, is the supermarkets. Detroit is known for its lack thereof, but Mexicantown is different, home to what I am told—over and over and over again—is the best supermarket in the city: Honey Bee Market/La Colmena.*

Chris sent me there my first day in Detroit. I needed to get cash for her; as soon as I'd arrived Chris had insisted I needed a security "club" for my car—and she could get one for me, cheap, with her student discount. I pointed out that Ford Escorts weren't particularly hot sellers on the black market, but Chris would have none of it. Her car was stolen out of the driveway last year: They'll take anything that's not nailed down, don't leave anything in your car!

Is there a grocery store nearby? I asked. I could just get some food and do cash back?

Her eyes lit up: Do you want to make ceviche? I have fish in the freezer, so you just need to get lemons and limes. Her eyes got bigger, excited. You can go to the Honey Bee, you'll love it. There are a half-dozen supermarkets in the neighborhood, she added, but this is the best one; everything is really fresh. We live within a mile of four, making our non-desert status official; three of the markets specifically cater to the Mexican American families who form the backbone of the neighborhood. She handed me a list: eight lemons, eight limes, onion, cilantro.

Off I went, about one mile, following Chris's directions: Up West Vernor's four lanes, past La Mexicana grocery with the taco truck in the parking lot; past the liquor store offering a free two-liter bottle of pop with every ten dollars in WIC or SNAP purchases; keep going; cross over the Fisher Freeway, and then, just after the shuttered police precinct being turned into art studios and an urban farm supply shop, but before the road dips under the colossal, abandoned skeleton of Detroit Central Station, go right. Then left. Two blocks, past the tortilleria, and the Honey Bee'll be on the right.

The market wasn't huge, but the produce section teemed with fruits and vegetables, including eleven different kinds of fresh chile. And this was before I noticed several different brands of fresh tortillas; house-made salsas and guacamole; a sprawling meat counter; bags of dried, pale green Peruvian beans and earthy speckled pintos; and a fresh food counter with *barbacoa* and taco specials. I was fingering the bags of lemons, six in each, when a young man working in the section stopped me.

They're $2.49, he said. I see you looking.

Thank you, I said, adding two bags to my basket.

On the way home, I passed one more landmark Chris had mentioned: a community garden, part of a citywide network of food gardens that began with about 80 plots in 2003. Focused on producing food in a city where procuring affordable, farm-fresh produce can be difficult for everyone, the network grew to 1,234 in 2010, with more than 80 percent of the gardeners returning each year. Our neighborhood garden was carved out of an empty stretch of land behind a series of boarded-up row houses, sitting across from the vacant lot opposite my duplex and visible from my bedroom window. Garlic tops shot up in crisp rows, lettuces were starting to leaf out. It wasn't yet May, and everything was just beginning to grow.

My first few weeks I am jobless, and I spend much of my time either tagging tours of the city from friends of friends or sitting in Chris's living room, chattering with the constantly rotating series of visitors. Her twenty-one-year-old daughter, Bianca, lives a mile deeper into Mexicantown and comes by, like most children, to take advantage of the material comforts now beyond her reach: in-house laundry and a full(ish) fridge. Chris's parents live next door, along with her sister, Brenda, and Brenda's four-year-old son, Adrian; their kitchen has somehow ended up without an oven, so Brenda

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* Colmena means hive, and was the name of the original corner market established by the family of one of the current proprietors when they first moved here from Mexico, selling basic groceries, including a modest selection of produce in a single refrigerated case, to Mexican factory workers. In 2006, the corner market was expanded into a full-service grocery store with an extensive produce section.
pops over with some regularity to make use of Chris's. Then there's Gabriel, a young lawyer she befriended during her bachelor degree studies in the early 2000s, and a sometime-suitor, whose name I don't manage to catch when he knocks on the door one night to see if she's home. (She's not, but I don't divulge that she is on a date with someone else.)

Brenda is one of the Detroiter's who commutes for her groceries the same way I expect I'll be commuting for my job. I used to be a Meijer girl, she says, watching Adrian scramble around the duplex in his pajamas, a mass of inky curls atop his head. But now that she's divorced and going back to school, she's a Walmart girl, through and through. It might only be a difference of thirty cents here, twenty cents there, but that matters to a family, she says, and the smaller stores in the city are too expensive. She won't go to the Walmart just outside the city limits, though; that one is dirty and crowded. Instead she drives a half-hour to get to a good one, in a wealthy suburb, where the store is clean and the produce is fresh.

I don't ever go shopping with Brenda, but I do notice in my own shopping that La Colmena isn't as expensive as I would have expected—and the quality is excellent. Onions, potatoes, zucchini, and oranges, for example, are all cheaper at La Colmena than at Walmart, by a range of 16 percent (zucchini) to 54 (oranges). Later, I learn that small grocers are much more competitive when it comes to the price of fresh produce, which for all of its industrialization retains a stubborn agrarian trait: It rots. Since fresh food can spoil, the economics of scale of industrial grain are simply not possible; there's no profitable way to consistently buy massive quantities cheaply and then sell it off over time. In fresh produce, one of the large supermarkets' biggest competitive advantages—scale—doesn't get them very far.

Processed food is a whole different story. You can buy an entire warehouse full of box meals and sell them off over the course of a year, enabling a different kind of calculation. The biggest companies sell their own line of private-label products, and most issue contracts to food manufacturers rather than manage the manufacturing process on their own dime. Walmart doesn't actually make its house brands; for most of its Great Value products, it likely picks a recipe from an existing supplier's offerings and puts its own label on it. That's why, when it became clear that Walmart's Great Value peanut butter was at risk for salmonella contamination in a 2007 outbreak, it was ConAgra—the manufacturer—that first issued the recall, not Walmart. Today, having a house brand means that Walmart can compete viciously, both pushing down the cost of its inventory by guaranteeing suppliers access to its huge market, and conceding ever-thinner margins in the interest of drawing more people into its stores for their remarkably low prices. Walmart might not win in produce, but it cleans La Colmena's clock when it comes to processed food. Of sixteen common canned and frozen items, every single one is more expensive at La Colmena than at Walmart. A fifteen-ounce can of Dole pears costs $1.99 at La Colmena, but the same Walmart's Great Value pears, twice as big, costs 98 cents; ounce for ounce, Walmart's canned pears cost less than one-quarter of those at La Colmena.

Research commissioned by Walmart, as well as some academic work, suggests that it beats other retailers by between 14 and 16 percent on price, but it's important to look at this research closely. The report commissioned by Walmart, for instance, excludes random weight items and meats, which is to say produce and fresh meat. Most studies take an average across multiple store items without detailing the differences between departments; the few studies that look at specific, rather than average prices, suggest that meat and produce are categories in which Walmart is—as I saw at La Colmena—the least able to compete. And aside from the Walmart-backed study, any research looking at the company's prices is operating with a large handicap: Walmart doesn't report its sales figures or prices to any of the national data agencies, and, as a private corporation, it has no obligation to do so.* Instead, researchers either base their work on prices at supercenter-format stores—which Walmart dominates—or focus on very tight geographic areas, compiling store-by-store comparisons in a single metropolitan area. Either way, they're dealing with information that can never tell them what they want to know: The precise degree of power Walmart yields in our food system.

Much of the research draws on broad averages, not just across store items, but often across different kinds and sizes of grocery stores. The difference between prices at a Walmart and small stores can be quite dramatic, but the difference between Walmart and other big chains—Albertsons or Kroger, for example—is much smaller, about 2 or 3 percent. Size changes the game significantly. In traditional supermarkets, stores are competing against each other on price, trying to find the sweet spot where a price is low enough to

* Given Walmart's market share within our food system, the omission of its data hinders accurate assessment of trends within it, particularly regarding price. The omission is so serious that in 2004 the National Bureau of Economic Research published a paper subtitled, "Does the Bureau of Labor Statistics Even Know That Walmart Exists?" (Hausman and Leibtag 2004)
bring in more shoppers and high enough to turn a profit. But places like Walmart don’t think like this. They have so many customers, and such a big share of the market, that massive sales volume is a given. Instead, the big guys focus on how to cut costs—things like distribution systems, and contracting out their own food manufacturing. Lower costs, in turn, mean they can charge lower prices when competition dictates it—or turn bigger profits when it doesn’t.

The undeniable king of private infrastructure is Walmart, which means that it is almost always possible for the company to intensify competition, and lower prices if it chooses. In order to stock a huge selection of products, Walmart has always maintained a hypersophisticated inventory and transportation system, building a private satellite network in the pre-techie 1980s that allowed it to manage a massive product line. When the company shifted into grocery in the 1990s, it could leverage that inventory system to develop a pricing scheme* where key items would be cheap enough to lure people into the store, but other items could make a profit. And as people flocked in for affordable groceries, Walmart’s share of our food supply grew at an unparalleled pace; at 22 percent, it now sells more than twice as much as the next three largest stores combined. If there is any store that can win on price, it’s Walmart.

One of the more persuasive arguments Walmart offers when it comes into a community is that its low prices are good for everyone. Not only are the prices at Walmart good for consumers who shop there, goes the argument, but they’re good for the people who don’t, too: Walmart’s lower prices beget competition and force down the prices at other stores. Most existing research suggests that Walmart’s presence causes a drop in local grocery prices of between 1 and 8 percent. There’s an important caveat to this, though: Without access to data over time, most research focuses on “snapshot,” examining prices at different stores over a very short period in time, seeing whether prices at local grocers are higher than supercenters’ over the course of, say, a month. Research has yet to delve deeply into the question of whether supercenters lower local food prices for the long haul, but in 2007 researchers in Wisconsin found something surprising. In their study

* A USDA study published in 2010 found that the price difference between nontraditional stores—the category of stores that includes Walmart—and traditional supermarkets was markedly smaller in cities with a high share of nontraditional stores. The average price difference in Atlanta and San Antonio, where supercenters dominate, was 5.3 percent, while in cities with low levels of supercenter retail, like New York and Philadelphia, it was 11.5 percent. This, said researchers, could indicate that traditional grocers lowered their prices in a bid at competition; or it could indicate that supercenter retailers, responding to the diminished competition, raised their prices to that of their remaining local competitors. (Leibtag, Barker, and Dutko 2010)
tent, a goal with which it is difficult to disagree. Another pillar of the initiative included making healthy food more affordable, saving Americans $1 billion on fresh fruits and vegetables. "No family should have to choose between food that is healthier for them and food they can afford," said Bill Simon, president and CEO of Walmart U.S., sharing the stage with First Lady Obama. He made it sound like a $1 billion discount for the poor, but Walmart wasn't reducing its own prices. That figure is derived from comparing Walmart's prices with those of other stores, not by estimating future reductions to Walmart's. The way Walmart plans to "save" us $1 billion is not by reducing the grocery bills of its own customers, but by selling its wares to new ones—by gaining market share.

The third piece of the initiative was the most interesting. Officials announced Walmart's intent to solve the problem of food deserts by building stores in urban neighborhoods—many of which have actively sought to keep the retailer and its downward pressure on wages out. "We are focused on bringing our mission of 'save money, live better' to these underserved areas," said Walmart's senior vice president of sustainability, Andrea Thomas, at the press conference announcing the program. "We believe that our initiative can make healthy, affordable food more accessible in the nation's food deserts."

I'm fairly confident that Brenda would not mind having a Walmart closer to home: She'd save on gas, and many of the prices are cheaper. (Taste, I later decide, is a wholly different matter.) And if the prices would stay cheap and the quality high, I don't know that I'd be able to work myself up about it, even after it occurs to me that in competing with the city's eighty-one supermarkets, Walmart would be taking business away from eighty-one individual entrepreneurs, all of whose profits repatriate into metropolitan Detroit. But, as Walmart gains more and more market share—by putting competitors out of business, by entering urban markets—why would they keep our food affordable?

You have to sit on the porch; it's a neighborhood institution.

Gabriel has just come over to visit, and he is insistent, all but pushing me out the front door to a brick patio overlooking the street. We sit on plastic chairs with Bianca, who's visiting from her apartment nearby, and her friend, Inez. Flowering baskets sway from the porch eaves in the humid spring twilight as we talk, and Bianca calls out greetings to everyone who walks past; she knows them all. It's Saturday night, my first one in Detroit and the night before the city's Cinco de Mayo parade. I'm still waiting to hear from Walmart about a third interview, so my weekend plans are to spend as little money as possible, which makes the porch an attractive option. There's a festive anticipation humming through the neighborhood as glossy lowriders cruise the block, countered by the more sobering elements of the celebration: a cluster of candles that cropped up beneath a photo labeled "R.I.P.," next to the telephone pole down the street; the police surveillance unit that took up residence across from the park; the police helicopter thundering in broad circles overhead. All of this, explains Bianca, is because four people were shot during last year's celebrations, including the young man memorialized in the shrine on the corner.

The neighborhood, adds Gabriel, is one of the best in Detroit, but it's still Detroit; he might be Mexican, but he wouldn't walk around at night by himself, and definitely not on Cinco de Mayo. We keep talking about Detroit, about how the city services keep diminishing, about work and the local lack thereof, about family and dating and school, about how drinking and driving is so accepted here that the police won't pull you over unless you're waving a gun out the window—and even then, says Gabriel, you'd probably have to be pulling the trigger.

The evening lazies on, and it might have just faded into bedtime except that Martina, Christina's younger sister, shows up, striding up the sidewalk, kissing Gabriel on the cheek, and introducing herself to me. Gabriel leans over to her.

You have to tell her about the foodie!

Oh, are you a foodie? she asks me, with a hint of challenge in her voice. After a few days of living with Christina, once it was clear that being honest about my work wouldn't endanger my undercover status at Walmart, I explained that I'm actually a writer. Gabriel already knew all about it when we met, so I'm sure Martina's already heard it, too.

Well, I like food. I like to cook.

She sighs and tells me a story.

So, I work at the radio station, and there's this guy I work with, he's younger, white, and he was talking and talking about these people called 'foodies'; he's one of them. So I ask him what that meant, "What's a foodie?" And he goes, "It's someone who's really, really into food, and grows their own, and then does things like make preserves and pickles and cans their food." Martina sighs again.

"They're like, really, really into food." And he's a foodie. And so I say,
"Oh, like my mom, she does that." Or, says Martina, leaning closer, she did, but now she's old. But, when I was a kid, she used to grow all these herbs and tomatoes and chiles and everything, just like back on the rancho in Mexico.

Gabriel looks at me. You've seen the garden, right? I nod: In back of the house there are two long strips of flowers and herbs, and plenty of room to grow food.

You mean she would pickle jalapeños and salsas from scratch? And you could eat it all year? Just from the backyard? I ask, remembering the meals I ate in Greenfield.

Yes! says Martina. That used to be all food. And it was a pain, man, to help with that. But it was real good, too.

I nod. Right. That's totally the same thing!

Right! says Martina. And so this guy, he says, "Oh no, not like that," and I can't get him to tell me what the difference is, he just keeps saying, "It's just, like, you really, really like your food," and I keep saying, "Like, my mom." And we go back and forth like this, and finally I just told him, straight up, "That's classist, you just don't get it." And all he could say was, "Foodies really care about what they eat."

What does that even mean, says Gabriel, do you really care about food? I mean, I'm like, right, everyone likes food, says Martina. I like food, but I ain't a fucking foodie, you know?

I know, right? I like food, says Gabriel, slapping his belly. Look at my panza!

We all laugh at this because he doesn't have any belly to speak of, but they're talking back and forth quickly now, old friends who can all but finish each other's sentences. They nearly forget about me. Then Martina looks over at me.

I'm sorry if we're being too . . .

Oh no, she's fine, says Gabriel, winking at me. I think she's a kindred spirit.

Well, in that case, says Martina, smiling wickedly, we have to take her to El Chaparral. She turns to me, eyes sparkling in the streetlight. You want to see a real Mexican town bar?

I do, of course, and even though it's only four blocks away, we drive over in Martina's hulking Mercury sedan. We park on the street in front of a building I'd seen on my walks around the neighborhood. I'd thought it was abandoned, but now the door is open, and from the sidewalk we can hear patrons chattering in barroom Spanglish. All through Mexicantown, I don't hear Spanish so much as its Anglicized hybrid, words swapped and traded and blended as they trickle out onto the street, sail out apartment windows, and roll out car doors.

Inside, we sit at the bar and Gabriel buys our drinks, PBR longnecks for him and me, and an iced shot of vodka for Martina, who takes a dollar from the bartender to feed the jukebox. She summons a flurry of guitars and trumpets threaded with deep masculine voices crooning in Spanish, and she and Gabriel throw their heads back and grin conspiratorially: I love this song! They say in unison. I smile, listening to lyrics I can understand but not translate, losing them in the hazy space between comprehension and definition.

Gabriel nudges me to turn around, smiling, his eyes directing me to a couple swaying together over the beaten floor. The man, old, is missing a few teeth beneath his white mustache. His thick head of white hair is slicked back neatly, and his lips move softly with the song. He's holding a woman who's younger but not young, thickly built, her skin dark against a fuchsia tank top and denim miniskirt. He spins and leads her in some approximation of salsa, the soccer match on the television behind them drowned out by the trilling of mariachi trumpets.

We're sitting there in our tipsy reverie when a Spanglish exclamation yanks us back to reality. A woman at the end of the bar is holding her purse and slapping the counter, setting her tab.

Ya me voy, porque I gotta work tomarra.

The drunken lilt to her voice says it all, and the three of us cackle like teenagers at the back of the classroom. But when we finally stop laughing, I realize she's at least got one up on me: I wish I had work to go to.

It takes three weeks in Detroit before I finally start at Walmart. There's a third interview, where I accept the job; a drug test, at a remote medical office in an industrial park near the airport, waiting for results, and waiting, and waiting, for the store to schedule an orientation, a process that takes so long I begin calling other stores in case it doesn't pan out. But finally, just past the middle of May, I get a call saying I am wanted in at 9 a.m. sharp for orientation on Tuesday.

As before, orientation passes in a blur of group activities, slickly produced video tutorials and a few personal lectures from staff about our roles on the floor. We're a mixed bunch of orientees: There are two girls in their
She's going to watch the video and see if it was your fault, says Randy.
Don't try to be a macho man, a macho woman.*

Before I can hit the floor, there's a parade of Computer Based Learning
modules to slog through. I come in at 7:00 a.m. two days after orientation,
as instructed, and find that I'm in better shape than most of the new hires,
since a good share of my training from before has carried over. Most of my
time is spent watching a series of videos that pertain directly to produce.
All of them underscore the basic tenet of produce sections everywhere: If
it's not fresh, it won't sell. This is an elegant bit of market-based logic that
I find reassuring.

In Produce Operations, I learn that produce is a living commodity rapid-
ly approaching its demise, and the produce section is nothing less than an
expansive life-support system. There can be no slacking off over here,
because 70 to 80 percent of purchases in the produce section are made on
impulse—and "Mom," Walmart's target shopper, does not impulsively buy
rotten lettuce. Naf that I am, I had thought that most of the work in pro-
duce would be rotating stock in the back room and throwing out anything
rotten, but there's a hidden world of preparation and presentation—Trim-
ing! Crisping! Merchandising!—with the singular goal of presenting our
food as fresh, no matter when it came in the door, and thus boosting sales.
This is important because profit margins are considerably higher in produce
than in the average store department.

But I'm not just handling produce, I'm handling food, just like everyone
else in the Fresh Section—Walmart's term comprising produce, bakery, and
deli—so I sit through a double-feature dealing directly with food safety.
The films—Food Safety 1 and Food Safety 2—seem mostly geared toward
people preparing fresh food in deli and bakery, given the initial video's
focus on basic concepts like using a thermometer to check temperature and
the vectors for delivering food-borne illnesses, though it occasionally dips
into more broadly applicable topics like proper handwashing techniques

*This line of discussion warning was not part of my orientation at the first Walmart, and I
have no way of knowing if the presentation is representative of those made at other
Walmart stores or was just one person's mistake. That said, all injuries in the workplace are covered
by workers' compensation law, regardless of whether they are the result of poor judgment on the
part of the worker or not. They can tell you that you won't get workers' comp, and that's not
true," explains a representative of the Michigan Department of Labor. "If everybody who was
injured at work had their claim denied because of—and I'm not going to say the way they do
their job, lift wrong or whatever—nobody would ever have a workers' comp claim. It just isn't
going to happen that way." (Workers Compensation Agency 2007 Employee, MI-DHS 2011)
and how to affix a hairnet. Part 2 goes into greater detail, highlighting the “Danger Zone” for fresh food—the temperature range between 41 and 140 degrees—and the importance of not leaving anything fresh in said zone for more than four hours, max. Little of this feels useful for produce—am I supposed to check the temperature of a cantaloupe?—but toward the end, everything starts to feel strangely familiar nonetheless. Then I realize why. I’ve heard bits and pieces of this before, in snippets from farmworkers and *mayordomos*, kitchen managers and line cooks. But in all the food jobs I’ve taken over the last year,* this is the only time I’ve ever been given an actual lesson in food safety.

My education concludes with *Food Safety and Handling*, a sort of greatest-hits of everything that’s come before. It opens, like a lot of Walmart videos, to a soaring U2 guitar riff from “Beautiful Day” and cuts between shot after shot of comfortably middle-class families of varying ethnic backgrounds cavorting in their well-appointed homes, yards, and kitchens. Then we move to a joyless pair of corporate heads of something-or-other explaining why food safety is important. They offer two reasons. The first is that food safety is important because it’s the law, and if we don’t follow the law, we might have to pay a lot of money. The implication, of course, is that they might otherwise dispense with the food safety, an observation that inspires me a new appreciation for food safety legislation. Once they’ve dispensed with this, the talking heads proffer the same motive that I’d like to think they kept in mind all along: We care about food safety because it’s the right
ting.

Awesome! We need people so bad!

This welcome comes from my new department head, Randy, the same befuzzled kid who interviewed me. Erica in personnel has just walked me to the produce section with a five-page handout listing, in arcane detail, what I am to be taught. Randy doesn’t look at the papers, which Erica says need to be returned within a month, checking off the different skills I’ve learned by one-, two-, three-, and four-week milestones. Instead, he begins to explain what he is doing with a chain of plastic labels bearing the names of different countries.

We’re working on our COOL labeling, he says.

* As outlined in the introduction, I did my reporting for the final section, Cooking, in between the two Walmart reporting stints.

Out what?

Country of origin, you have to have these up for any fruit or vegetable where 52 percent or more do not have a label or tag, it’s state law, and you can get a $25,000 fine if you don’t have it up, so it’s really important. Randy recites this apparent fabrication* in monotone as he positions labels for Mexico under the peppers, Canada under cucumbers, then chuckles: I’m not losing my job over something like that.

From there, we’re off on a whirlwind tour of the section, which consists of three major landmarks. We start at the back of the section with the unappetizingly named wet wall, the refrigerated shelves that get misted with water to freshen the bulk vegetables—collards, kale, red and green leaf lettuce, turnip greens, mustard greens, broccoli, leeks, zucchini, cilantro, parsley, yellow squash, bell peppers, poblano peppers, tomatillos, jalapenos, and all the rest. The wall continues with salad dressings, bagged salad, and mushrooms before terminating at a croston display. Directly opposite the wet wall is the second landmark, a pair of big “mods,” two-sided modular displays, separated by a short aisle. The mod opposite the wet wall’s vegetables is stocked with fruit—domestics like apples and citrus on the vegetable side, exotics like papaya and plantains on the other—and the one opposite the mushrooms and salad is full of potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and garlic—including some jars of minced garlic, from The Garlic Company, which I’d picked for in California. The final major line of display begins closest to the front door with the farmer tables, hip-high shallow containers nestled atop deep bins so that from afar it looks as if there’s a giant square barrel mounded with tomatoes, or corn, or blueberries. There’s also a massive banana display—they’re the number one item in the section—a short refrigerated island where we stock grapes, berries, and cut fruit near the deli counter, and a tiny mod for bagged nuts. Do I have any questions, Randy wants to know, and there’s really just one: What do you want me to do?

Randy leads me to a pair of swinging black doors, and we duck into the

* Since the introduction of Country of Origin Labelling in 2008, which requires grocers to identify the country from which produce comes with signage, no retailers have been fined for failing to follow the guidelines. The maximum fine for a violation is $1,000. (Samuel Jones 2011)
† During my last week at Walmart, I stocked fresh bulbs of garlic from the same company, although—it being June, before the California crop came in—the garlic had been imported, in this case from Argentina. To see the wholesaler crate label for that shipment, visit www.americanwayofeating.com.
back room, where we are confronted by a half-dozen pallets stacked high above my head with crates of food, a narrow passageway carved between them down the middle of the room. Watermelons bulge against giant cardboard bins, snails of corn husk press through their plastic crates, and strawberries lean in a tower seven feet tall. A short, stocky woman with hair the color of steel is shaking her head at all of it. Her name tag says Jean.

Can you believe what they left us? Jean says to Randy, who introduces us. She turns around, facing the pallets, then throws a glance over her shoulder at me. Oh, you don't know what you've gotten yourself into, she says, but we can sure use you.

It's crazy back here, says Randy. We're short-staffed, and they bring in so much food. It's all supposed to be put away in four hours. That's their nice little idea, he says, making air quotes with his hands, and it doesn't happen very much.

If the department is so short-staffed, I later ask Randy, why did Walmart just hire two part-time people? He shakes his head again and tells me that Walmart doesn't really like to hire full-time workers; co-workers from other departments tell me the same thing.

But for now, there's the back room to deal with. The ceiling is high, and there are heavy steel wire shelves, five or six feet deep, flanking either side of the room. The food that doesn't need to be refrigerated—potatoes, tomatoes, bananas, onions—lives on the shelves, "the steel," out here; good luck getting to it, since the new pallets block all access. Along the back wall is a heavy canvas shade in lieu of a door. It rolls up and down with the push of a button to reveal the walk-in, a refrigerated room with more steel shelves down either side and with enough room between them to leave a line of pallets in the middle. A ventilation shaft bisects the ceiling, its two fans blowing out cold air and leaking water onto the pallets below.

Randy finishes the tour by showing me the food prep area, a narrow hallway along the outer wall of the walk-in. There's a triple steel sink and a food prep table on the left, for crisping and trimming. On the right sit crates of miscellaneous rotting food—"returns" that have been culled from the floor, and which have to be inventoried, using a hand-held scanner called a Telzon, before they can be thrown away. There's a door at the back for deli's dry storage, so I shouldn't worry if I see deli people coming through, though sometimes we put the returns back there, and it can get to be a real mess.

I watch Randy and Jean eye the pallets skeptically. There's some discus-
will clear the shelves of the unfresh and unsalable, do my part to bring the masses the healthy, quality food they seek and deserve. Then Gabe bursts my bubble.

Of course, Walmart doesn’t always have the freshest stuff, he says. That’s how we keep the prices low.

Gabe pulls out a few more mushrooms, tosses them onto my cart, and walks away, unclipping a walkie-talkie from his belt and calling for Randy over the airwaves.

Supermarket produce sections have long been one of America’s underappreciated wonders. We think of supermarkets as being the places where food is bought and sold, but they are simply the most visible part of the massive, hidden network that sprawls out beneath them—and this is especially true when it comes to produce. Today, supermarkets control and coordinate the sale of 95 percent of our fruits and vegetables, and roughly one of every four dollars Americans spend on fresh produce ends up at Walmart, a feat less about sales than its mastery of logistics. “The misconception is that we’re in the retail business,” Jay Fitzsimmons, senior vice president and treasurer of Walmart, told investors in 2003, fifteen years after the company had begun selling groceries. “[But really] we’re in the distribution business.”

Stores have always distributed goods, of course, but when supermarkets first began, distribution of fresh food was intensely local. In the 1930s, most farmers sold their goods by setting a price and haggling over it—with individual customers at public markets, with wholesalers and brokers, or with grocery stores. If produce was shipped across the country, the equation didn’t change much; a big California farmer would set a price with a Detroit wholesaler or broker and ship it out. There were lots of farms; in 1930, America had 6.3 million of them; about half of which grew fruits or vegetables. Just as important, there were many ways to sell what they grew. In 1932, about 70 percent of the food sold in New York City, for instance, went through the decentralized mish-mash that defined that era’s food economy: public markets and jobbers, small stores and wholesalers, peddlers and vegetable stalls. Like a wave of immigrants coming to America, food came from myriad farms, moved through slightly fewer channels, and, once here, spread out to myriad dinner plates.

In those early days of food marketing, every farmer and buyer was negotiating in a hectic market. If a buyer tried to lowball a farmer, the farmer had plenty of other places to sell; similarly, if a farmer tried to price-gouge, buyers could go to other farmers. Most food, therefore, was priced according to the oldest rules in the book, supply and demand. The system for distributing fresh food in the 1930s wasn’t perfect, but the decentralized way food stores got their produce meant that it approached what most Americans think of when we think “free market”: producers and buyers, negotiating a fair price from equal footing.

Food stores in 1930s America were, for the most part, just stores. They specialized in selling things to make a profit, handling distribution as a matter of course but not focusing on it. As supermarkets matured, this changed. Marketing research showed that the more items a store carried, the more things people actually bought, so supermarkets began to stock more products (and more brands of products). Today, the average supermarket sells nearly 50 times as many items as the first King Kullen store, and a Walmart supercenter sells 135 times more. But all these products had to get to the store somehow, and eventually supermarkets realized it would be cheapest to coordinate the distribution themselves. By 1998, forty-nine of the fifty largest supermarkets in the country were running their own internal distribution networks and saving as much as 60 percent on operations costs as a result.

Once the supermarkets had built their own infrastructure for cheaply delivering huge volumes of food, they had every reason to keep doing it. By lowering their cost of doing business, big food stores could drive prices down so far that they put smaller competitors out of business. And by making massive internal infrastructure a prerequisite for competing, the big stores made it nearly impossible for new ones to open up. The only way for smaller stores to compete was to merge into companies big enough to build an internal infrastructure, something only huge businesses could afford.

Meanwhile, the easiest way to keep stores stocked with produce was to contract with growers big enough to meet the demand. In the 1990s, as food retail got bigger and consolidated, agriculture did the same. From 1987 to 2007, large farms more than doubled their share of agricultural sales in the United States, and today account for nearly 60 percent of farm sales. Over

* Among early food wholesalers’ imperfections, as documented by the Federal Trade Commission, were collusion to fix prices among the handlers who controlled the limited receiving and marketing facilities; produce being destroyed to keep prices high; and new entrants being excluded by “rules that were occasionally enforced by threats, sabotage, and even violence.” (Tedlow 1996, 209–10)
the same period, the market share of small farms* dropped by two-thirds; mid-sized farms' share decreased by one-third. As with supermarkets, most communities are fed not by a diverse and flexible web of farmers, but by a shrinking number of ever-larger farms. By 2007, just under 6 percent of farms accounted for 75 percent of farm sales in the United States, at an average acreage of 2,216 (three and a half square miles); the average American farm is 418 acres.

Both sizes are likely bigger than what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote, “the small landholders are the most precious part of a state.” The idea was at the root of our republic's expansion, and when Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862, he set the maximum acreage per family at 160 acres. The same benchmark helped shape the fields I worked in California. The 1902 National Reclamation Act, President Theodore Roosevelt's massive dam-and-irrigation-building effort that brought water to California's great valleys, limited access to irrigation water to farms of 160 acres or less. (Industrial farmers largely flouted the rule until they convinced President Reagan to sign the Reclamation Reform Act in 1982, increasing the limit to 960 acres and making provisions for exemptions to it.)

In hindsight, this progression from pastoral small farms and quaint produce stalls to supermarkets and agribusiness seems inexorable: Industrial agriculture creates one economy of scale, enabling a new way of selling food to consumers—supermarkets—at lower cost. Once in place, this new delivery system applies economies of scale to transportation, again making it possible to lower costs, thereby conferring advantages to anyone who can control transport as well as sales. This in turn favors suppliers who are capable of functioning on this larger scale, prompting a wave of consolidation among suppliers seeking to match the one unfolding in retail, and reconfiguring the rules of the game such that only the biggest players can compete. Inevitably, the number of players shrinks until only the strongest remain, controlling more and more of the market. Some marketing experts describe the modern supermarket industry a “natural oligopoly,” where we find not only that a handful of players control the game, but that it wouldn't work any other way.

There is actually nothing natural about this system. To walk through Walmart's cavernous aisles is to walk through a landscape created by a century's worth of decisions America has made about its food. We prized agricultural bounty; we valorized mass marketing; we made transportation and distribution into a science. We've built a massive infrastructure capable of taking whatever we grow and delivering it wherever we choose, on a scale heretofore unseen; this much is true. And yet I'm reminded, in a small way, of what John Steinbeck wrote when he visited migrant labor camps not far from where I picked grapes: There is a failure here that topples all our successes. It is far easier to eat well in America than in most of the world, but we've done little to ensure that fresh and healthy food is available to everyone.

If there's one thing the Walmart training videos impressed upon me, it's that produce is fresh and must be maintained as such, which, surprisingly, gives me and Walmart a common purpose. I find myself internalizing one of the turns of phrase in the Walmart videos: “We want a better life for our customers; after all, we're just like them.” I want the food to be good for the customers, because I want the food I buy to be good, too. I'm therefore struck by something I didn't feel when I worked in grocery: a mission, a grand social responsibility to provide fresh, high-quality produce. Most of our work here centers on removing food that is not fresh and replacing it with the stuff that is. But there's a smaller, though no less important, task we're required to perform, and Randy introduces me to it on my second day on the floor: crisping.

There was a whole segment about the practice in my Produce Management video. The basic concept is to rehydrate limp greens so that they appear fresh. I do this on occasion at home, though I realized after watching the video that I was going about it all wrong. First, I'd never bothered to trim off the ends of anything—not the base of the lettuce, not the stems of the cilantro, not the slender ends of kale. Second, I'd always submerged them in cold water and thrown them into the fridge. It's better, I learn, to cut off the very ends of the plant. Slicing off the most desiccated tissue allows the plant to more readily absorb water. What's more, the water should be lukewarm, so that cell walls open up and let more water in. Then, after draining the water off, I should wrap a labeled twist tie around it for identification purposes before flushing it into a cooler so that the cell walls close up, plump with water, and yield crisp leaves. Randy doesn't really explain this process.

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* While the number of small farms has risen in recent years, their overall market share has not. In 1987, there were roughly 1.85 million small farms, accounting for 22 percent of farm sales. Ten years later, in 1997, there were 1.6 million small farms, accounting for 13 percent of farm sales; and by 2007, the number of small farms had bounced back to 1.8 million—but market share had dropped to 7 percent. (Author's calculations, based on National Agricultural Statistics Service 2007, 10; National Agricultural Statistics Service 1997, 12–15)
leaves costs $2.50, marked up 85 percent from the $1.35 Walmart paid for it, while a head of the stuff costs 88 cents—Jean waves me off. She buys all her lettuce this way because then she almost always eats it, which she doesn’t do if she just buys a whole head of it. Then Jean concedes one of her frustrations with the produce section: Randy doesn’t understand about the freshness.

If there’s an expiration date, there’s a reason for it, you know? He’ll just say, Oh, it looks fine, but if you look close, it doesn’t.

This isn’t the first sign that Randy’s produce acumen is in disrepair. Yesterday, when I was helping him stock the tropical fruits, he asked me if I knew how to cook plantains. I nodded and explained that they’re sort of like starchy bananas, prompting his eyes to go wide. They’re related to bananas?

Now, I realize that Randy can’t be more than a few years out of high school, and if he doesn’t know anything about plantains it could well be because the white Midwestern diet rarely includes them and besides, he eats a lot of fast food from the chain where he has his second job since it lets him save money on groceries. But while youth and lack of education might explain why the plantain surprised Randy, or why he might keep food around longer than we’d like, they do little to answer the question I now put to Jean: If Randy doesn’t know anything about produce, and he doesn’t seem to care about freshness, how did he get to be a manager in produce? As with many small towns where Walmart operates, it’s one of just three supermarkets, and only one of those even comes close to Walmart in size—which puts Randy in charge of half the town’s produce supply. Jean shrugs. The job opened up, he applied for it, and you know how that goes.

There’s no way for me to know if every Walmart is this casual in its hiring of produce managers; no reason, really, to believe that Jean was doing anything other than talking smack. But I do notice that the basic set-up of the section—something that’s fairly consistent across stores—includes a raft of waist-high “farmers’ tables.” We pile all manner of perishables on top of them—cucumbers, lettuce, raspberries, strawberries—despite the fact that they have no refrigeration system. For some stuff, this is fine; strawberries on sale fly off the tables so quickly I sometimes stock them twice in a shift. But cucumbers begin to wilt after a few hours at room temperature, and the raspberries linger for days, enough that I grow accustomed to needling to dig down to the bottom layer on the table, assured of finding plenty of moldy containers.

I spend most of the afternoon hunting and pecking my way across the salad grid. My flat cart is stacked tall with cardboard cases of varying salads, and I’m humbled by the difficulty I find myself having with the task at

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* The name lettuce actually derives from the Latin *lactuca*, or milky, a reference to its sap, which contains a hypnotic similar to opium. For an excellent discussion on the history of lettuce, see *Much Depends on Dinner* (Visser 1986, 194-99)
hand. It’s not complicated—I just open a case, remove the bag and try to match it to its mates on the grid—but visual matches have never been my thing, and I repeatedly find myself muttering, “Dole Very Veggie” or some such title, scanning the same shelves over and over again like some displaced contestant on Classic Concentration. Sometime near the end of my shift, a lanky young man attired in a style somewhere between hippie and punk approaches me for advice, a bag of Dole Classic Romaine in his hand.

Is this the same as a head of lettuce? This is better than a head of lettuce, right?

Well, I say, honestly, it depends on what you want to do with it.

I mean this is really cheap.

It depends on what you’re after, I say, weary of explaining my preference for head lettuce—uncut lettuce doesn’t dry out as quickly, it often stays fresher longer, and it can be used for sandwiches as well as salads—in case it could be construed as poor salesmanship. He thanks me and walks away, then comes back a minute later, snapping his cell phone shut.

My mom doesn’t want this, she wants a head of lettuce ‘cause you can do what you want with it and it doesn’t go bad as quick, he says. Then, I notice appreciatively, he puts the bag back exactly where he found it.

Fair enough, I say.

You have a blessed day, he says, startling me with his Christianity as he walks off to get his lettuce.

In my normal life, I might be inclined to lament the lack of cooking knowledge that I see in my customers, and Randy, and Jean. But if I know more about preparing food, I quickly learn that I’m incredibly ignorant when it comes to buying quality produce. I learned to cook from a mix of box dinners and cookbooks, supplemented by a grandmother who let me help in the kitchen; along the way, I picked up intangible tips like the proper thickness of pie dough, the lightness of butter creamed properly with sugar. But the rest of the skills required to feed myself—avoiding wrinkled skins on tomatoes, planning when and how to eat—came from my father, who juggled an invalid wife, three small children, and limited cooking knowledge. No wonder I stammer whenever Gabe strolls through the section, asking me my opinion on whether something should be thrown out or not; I never really learned what to look for.

Truthfully, the bulk of my food literacy comes from one broad source: my family. This is how it has worked for nearly everyone, for as long as anyone can remember. Even in the 1950s, when home economics was a mainstream class for female students, only about a quarter of all high school students took it, the same proportion as today. For decades, then, three-quarters of us—myself included—have relied almost entirely on the skills we could easily learn at home. Our parents’ ability to teach us about our meals shrank dramatically when mothers began entering the workforce in the mid-twentieth century. It wasn’t just that our parents cooked less because they had to work; the more time-strapped they were, the less time they had to pass their knowledge on to their children. In the process, we left the learning of a vital skill up to chance.

There’s no formal government or scholarly survey that tracks Americans’ cooking literacy; correspondingly, there’s little academic research on it. But private industry keeps an eye on how much we cook (less so the reasons behind it)—mostly to identify potential markets for new food products. For decades, these studies have typically found that Americans’ willingness to cook is on the decline, as well as their ability to do so. In 1996, more than half of all Americans reported they had less knowledge and fewer cooking skills than their mothers and grandmothers. The same year, more than two-thirds of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds said they could not fix a meal. The best evidence of America’s waning kitchen skills may come from career cookbook editors and recipe writers, who’ve found themselves adjusting instructions to reflect the shift. “Add two eggs,” was the directive that Bonnie Slotnick, a longtime cookbook editor, said she used at the start of her career in talking to a Washington Post reporter in 2006. “In the ’80s, that was changed to ‘beat two eggs until lightly mixed.’ By the ’90s, you had to write, ’In a small bowl, using a fork, beat two eggs.’ We joke that the next step will be, ‘Using your right hand, pick up a fork and . . .’”

Twenty years ago, my customer at the lettuce rack would have had one option if he wanted lettuce: Buy a head, wash it, dry it, cut it. But food companies saw that Americans were losing both time to cook and fluency in the kitchen, so they began offering ways to avoid using the kitchen at all. America’s great exodus from the kitchen is on display all around me in produce: whole potatoes sheathed in plastic, ready for the microwave, with a price tag of 88 cents apiece, cost the same per pound as the Idaho potatoes in the bin next to them. Just under three ounces of apple slices, hermetically sealed along with a packet of caramel sauce, cost $1, putting the per-pound cost above $5; a pound of whole Gala apples costs $1.67. Eight ounces of shredded cabbage and carrots retail for $1.39, or $2.78 a pound, while an entire head of fresh cabbage costs 58 cents a pound and a pound of carrots
tials for $1.66. In my more affluent days, I've made use of these as much as anyone—which is why it disturbs me to realize that by industrializing the preparation of produce, we've made it more dangerous to our health. Bagged lettuce, for example, typically run through giant industrial processing systems, mixing crops from different fields in giant proportions. Pre-cut fruit gets exposed to more sets of human hands and utensils. All of that creates opportunities for contamination, and modern distribution networks make it easy for such problems to spread far and wide.

Outside the produce section, aisle after aisle reminds me that America has become a nation that watches cooks far more than it imitates them. The biggest proof is in the rise of meals like Hamburger Helper, which has been upgraded into numerous brands since my childhood, many of which no longer even require one to brown meat. I could pop over to frozen foods and buy a bag of Great Value frozen noodles, meat, vegetables, and spices, pop it in the microwave, and have dinner for two in thirteen minutes for $4.98. But going that route could be dangerous for my health in the long run. Most of the processed food we turn to in lieu of cooking is so high in salt that it accounts for about three-quarters of Americans' sodium intake (a fact owing much to salt's preservative qualities as to our taste for it). A single serving of Hamburger Helper Beef Stroganoff supplies more than one-third of the recommended daily intake of sodium; Walmart's bagged sausage and peppers provides 40 percent.

The fastest way to solve this conundrum is money. The affluent can readily avoid the kitchen while still eating well simply by paying more: for processed foods with less salt or fat, for premade meals that are neither deep fried nor slathered with mayonnaise (like much of what I see come out of the Freeze). Without cost as a central concern, buying healthy, fresh, pre-prepared meals is a no-brainer. But when cost is a concern, that $5 sack of a frozen meal lets people like me and my co-workers avoid the kitchen anyway, freeing us from needing to know how to cook at a price we can afford.

There are two strategies currently in use to battle this money-time crunch while maintaining our health. One is to make options like Hamburger Helper healthier by lowering their salt and sugar content. The other is to make these ultra-easy options less necessary. When cooking instruction is paired with basic nutrition education, Americans cook more and eat more healthfully—even when money is tight. Organizations that run cooking classes with the poor have begun surveying their students. Nearly four in five low-income ducts who participated in two-month-long cooking classes in twenty-eight cities, run by national nonprofit Cooking Matters, reported eating more nutritious meals after leaving the class; nearly two-thirds also reported saving money on their grocery budget. In 2010, university researchers undertook a close assessment of a cooking class for twelve low-income adults, taught by a chef. The themes that emerged among the students were consistent: They felt more comfortable cooking, more aware of the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables, and more capable of planning healthy, affordable meals.

I don't know where most of my Walmart peers fall on this question, and since breaks are staggered in my department, I never get to eat with the people I work with—the folks I could easily strike up a conversation with and see whether they cook much or care about their health, or eat many fruits and vegetables. But I see a lot of actual food brought in for meals, and far less guzzling of two-liter bottles and potato chips, than I did on the night shift. Mostly people bring in sandwiches and yogurt, or leftovers from dinner the night before: spaghetti and salads, lasagna and chicken breast. And I do notice one thing: Whatever they might bring from home, everyone's eager to partake of fresh produce when it doesn't cost anything. Every other week, "Free Fruit Fridays" play the same role on the day shifts that doughnuts did on the night, crowding the break room tables with grapes, apples, grapefruit, oranges, bananas. And by the end of the shift, the bins of fruit have been picked clean.

There's one offstage area that my orientation leader forgot to mention: the produce back room. Unlike pretty much every other inch of Walmart, there's not even a security camera back here. There's nothing risqué going on, unless you count our unabashed snacking on pilfered bits of new shipments—We have to know if it's good or not, Randy explained to me—but it does mean that when it comes to conversation, all bets are off. Brent and Sam, the two young black men I work with, delight in reciting dirty rap lyrics to each other, trying to see who can outdo the other. The rapping stops if Pam or Jean, the middle-aged women, are around, and on the few occasions when it gets too raunchy—when specific acts are being described in detail—I just clear my throat, smile, and say, "I'm right here, guys. Right over here. Watch it."

This is also where I get to know my co-workers. It's when we're stripping down moldy corn, out of view of the customers, that I hear about Jean's intense interest in flyball—some sort of activity involving her dog and, she implies but never explains, a ball—and how everyone talks about being afraid Walmart will fire them, but she did military service before coming here, and Walmart doesn't scare her. While I hand crates of tomatoes to
ent, lifting them over my head so he can get them from his perch on a ladder and secure them in steel shelving, I learn that his girlfriend just moved to Hawaii, and he charms me with the loss in his voice when he says, I can, at the airport, serious, I was bawling. And when I dash into the back room, pulling my cart a little too quickly behind me, Bob, a quiet, rail-in steelworker who came to Walmart ten years ago when his plant closed down, tells me, Watch it, hot rod. Sam is less chatty, but he's probably the most helpful, always explaining what he can to make work easier. If I don't know the price for something, I can just walk across the Action Alley to the annex in health and beauty, that's easier than getting Randy to check it, and he seems to know the most about produce, calling me over to display perfectly ripe pineapple, pointing out the gold hue gridded over its skin.

Really, the only co-worker I struggle with is Pam, a married mother who eps me on my toes by sharing my frustration with Randy while issuing meaments prompted, so far as I can tell, by our shared skin tone and the economic advantages it might imply. When we're busy at the start of the month, e greets me in the back room saying, It's real crazy out there, all those people ending their free money from the government. Later, when she suggests I e gloves to remove fruit from its crates and I say it's a good idea—all those sti ce she corrects me. No, the reason I should use gloves is all those ople picking it piss all over the food. At this I protest, saying as vaguely as I can that I've worked in the fields, and I've never seen anyone pee on the food, which she takes as an invitation to extol the virtues of a new law passed in Arizona allowing police to stop anyone at random and check their immigration status, and her excitement at a similar one being considered in Michigan. It's out time, she says, because then the farmers would have to pay real wages. I can only say I don't think that would happen—historically, growers will either mechanized or moved their fields to cheaper territory. I don't tell her that when I worked in fields I was the only white person I ever saw out there, even as California grappled with an economic downturn nearly as bad Michigan's; that would only raise questions. So there's really no reason for Pam, who came to Walmart after the manufacturer she worked for shut down, to believe that I'm doing anything besides pulling this out of my ass, as she treats me as such. She ignores the comment.

They wouldn't move all of them, she says without glancing up from the apple she's coring.

They wouldn't move all of them, she repeats. And we need the jobs here.

Detroit, I realize about a month in, would be a far bleaker place if I had a different roommate. Christina, as Gabriel tells me over PB&J one night, will give you the shirt off her back, though you may endure a little traffic while getting it. She's run political campaigns in the neighborhood as well as a nightclub—right now, she's working reception at a gym while she works on her master's degree in bilingual education—so she knows everyone and was no time offering up her expertise. I want to make friends? She knows someone in the neighborhood starting a recreational soccer league, here's his email, he's great, you'll love him, tell him I sent you. I have a flat tire? Here's a can of Fix-A-Flat, and drive west on Vernor until you see Arandas, you might need to use your Spanish but they'll fix it for twenty dollars, you'll love it. I don't have plans and I have no money? There's a civic event about the future of Detroit tonight and there should be some free food, too, you'll love it.

Christina quickly sizes up that I'm not bringing in much money and begins—like the mother that she is—quietly forcing help upon me. First she recruits me as a sous chef for batch after batch of ceviche, where she provides the fish and I get the citrus, onion, and cilantro. She tells me to eat whenever I want in the house: We might be broke, but we can eat! she says, prancing out the door to a date with a fireman. And a few weeks in, she asks if I'll run to the store and get basic groceries if she pays for them; if I do the shopping, of course, we'll share everything. Money's tight for her, too, so it's nothing gourmet—rice, beans, tortillas, crema, fixings for salsa, and some squash—and I'm still expected to contribute, usually in labor rendered in the kitchen, but what else do I have to offer?

My weekly food bills average around $40, which includes about $15 on coffee and cheap pizza and beer with friends, and the rest of it dedicated largely to rice, beans, tortillas, and the discount just-about-to-go-bad rack