Good Food Should Not Be A Luxury

Excerpted from *The American Way of Eating, Undercover at Walmart, Applebee’s, Farm Fields and the Dinner Table*, Tracie McMillan, (Scribner, 2012).

**The American Way of Eating—Walmart**

... I mention the bird to Randy [one of her supervisors] and he tells me not to worry about it.

“Walmart doesn’t like to call pest control for stuff like that ‘cause it costs $6,000 to have someone come out and get it,” Randy says. “We can get someone to open the skylight so it can fly away if it wants; it’s best to wait for it to go away and die.”

This explains a lot of other things about the department.

Like the leak I saw on my first day, which both limits our capacity to refrigerate produce and boosts the humidity level in the cooler; food has been rotting rapidly. One day I three out two hundred pounds of asparagus, the base of every bunch coated in thick moldy layers. An entire pallet of fresh corn, still in its husk, became too consumed with old for sale, so we stripped off the offending layers of husk and sent more than twenty crates of it to a food bank. And then there’s the moment when Mary, in deli, comes over and quietly says that she is sorry to bring this up, but she bought three green peppers that looked fine but when she cut them open at home, every single one was filled with mold.

When we find rotten food—on the sales floor or in the cooler—we can’t just throw it away. We have to inventory it—it’s called doing returns—so there’s a perpetually growing stack of crates next to the food prep area crammed with rotting lettuce, moldy berries, slimy greens, expired bags of salad, and wrinkled mushrooms, not to mention vast stores of food that are still edible but not pretty enough for sale. Save for Gabe, who pokes his head over every once in a while, nobody besides Sam seems to know anything about produce: what keeps longest, what needs to move quickly, what a fresh artichoke looks like, how to tell a pineapple is too ripe to last another day on the floor. And nobody’s ever assigned returns, a time consuming job, so the food sits there for a day or so until the fruit flies and putrid juices get to be too much and can no longer be ignored. When Walmart introduces a composting program toward the end of my tenure, the situation gets worse. Before we can take the rotting produce to the compost bin, it has to be removed from all the packaging, which increases the workload even
though we’ve had no increase in staff. The return crates begin to number in the dozens.

No wonder everyone in produce eventually ends up resigned to the state of affairs, though the newer among us are still working our way from recognition to acceptance as if advancing through the stages of grief.

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