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Grocery: The Buying And Selling Of Food In America



Synopsis

In *A Grocery*, bestselling author Michael Ruhlman offers incisive commentary on America's relationship with its food and investigates the overlooked source of so much of it—the grocery store. In a culture obsessed with food—how it looks, what it tastes like, where it comes from, what is good for us—there are often more questions than answers. Ruhlman proposes that the best practices for consuming wisely could be hiding in plain sight—in the aisles of your local supermarket. Using the human story of the family-run Midwestern chain Heinen's as an anchor to this journalistic narrative, he dives into the mysterious world of supermarkets and the ways in which we produce, consume, and distribute food. *A Grocery* examines how rapidly supermarkets—and our food and culture—have changed since the days of your friendly neighborhood grocer. But rather than waxing nostalgic for the age of mom-and-pop shops, Ruhlman seeks to understand how our food needs have shifted since the mid-twentieth century, and how these needs mirror our cultural ones. A mix of reportage and rant, personal history and social commentary, *A Grocery* is a landmark book from one of our most insightful food writers.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Abrams Press; Reprint edition (May 29, 2018)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1419729535

ISBN-13: 978-1419729539

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 50 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #183,876 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in *Books > Business & Money > Economics > Commerce* #131 in *Books > Business & Money > Industries > Agriculture* #133 in *Books > Business & Money > Industries > Restaurant & Food*

Customer Reviews

"Anyone who has ever walked into a grocery store or who has ever cooked food from a grocery store or who has ever eaten food from a grocery store must read *Grocery*. It is food journalism at its best and I'm so freakin' jealous I didn't write it." (Alton Brown, author of *EveryDayCook*) "As fascinating as it is instructive, Ruhlman's book digs deep into the world of how we shop and how we eat. It's a marvelous, smart, revealing work." (Susan Orlean, author

of *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend and The Orchid Thief*) "If you care about why we eat what we eat—â• and you want to do something about it—â• you need to read this absorbing, beautifully written book. " It will change the way you shop." (Ruth Reichl, author of *My Kitchen Year*) "Welcome to another side of Michael Ruhlman—not the cookbook author or the chronicler of great chefs, but the smart, conversational guy pushing his shopping cart alongside yours in the supermarket. *Grocery* is a fun, engaging mix of memoir and insight into the ways (past and present) that Americans go about procuring their food." (David Kamp, author of *The United States of Arugula*) "An illuminating journey through and behind the grocery store" (Kirkus Reviews) "Informative and inspiring" (Booklist (STARRED REVIEW)) "Ruhlman's lively reportage yields an engrossing tour of the aisles." (Publisher's Weekly) "Ruhlman's book courageously explores the cultural phenomena of the grocery store, the business of food, and their relationship to how America feeds itself, with wisdom and also the wide-eyed wonder of a child seated in a grocery cart, wheeling through the aisles." (Supermarket News) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Michael Ruhlman has collaborated on several bestselling cookbooks, including *The French Laundry Cookbook*, *Bouchon*, and *Alinea*. He is the author of critically acclaimed books including *The Soul of a Chef*, *The Elements of Cooking*, *Ratio*, and *Ruhlman's Twenty*. Ruhlman has written about food and cooking for the *New York Times*, *Gourmet*, *Food Arts*, and other publications. He lives in New York City.

Like grocery stores themselves, Michael Ruhlman's *Grocery* is all over the place, stuffed to the rafters, with numerous departments and unexpected items. It is a lot of memoir, a smattering of rants, endless lists, and a bunch of behind the scenes negotiating. Like a grocery, there's something for everyone. Because he doesn't have a horse in this race, Ruhlman can be neutral or critical as needed. He slams the food desert of the center aisles of supermarkets, yet admits he buys some of this poison himself because he likes it. He is critical of agriculture, but finds much to praise in a new generation of farmers who prize quality over quantity. And he digs at medicine and nutritionists in a frontal attack: "Fat isn't bad, stupid is bad." "We learn the economics of the business, how size matters, how grocers find products, and how they run their stores. The business has changed dramatically in our lifetimes. We might not have noticed because we're in

those stores every week. It's a trillion dollar business in the USA. From the hot take-out meals (and even restaurants and bars) to the organics and the gluten-free, the mix is anything but stagnant. And it's up to 40,000 items now, from the 5000 when he was a child. Beef sales are way down, fish is way up. Fruit is no longer seasonal. Frozen food is still blah, and there are still hundreds of sugary breakfast cereals and snack foods to wade through. Sadly, grocers are forced to stock them all because customers will go elsewhere if their particular variety is AWOL. There are aspects he has missed, like what grocers do with stale-dated foods. There's nothing about community involvement, how the stores weave themselves into the fabric of the neighborhood. There's no mention of all the games grocers have played, like specials and Green Stamps and loyalty programs. Or home and online shopping. And he never addresses customer complaints, like why there are 24 checkout lanes when only four are ever open at once. And it really could use some photos. Grocery is a kind of love letter to Cleveland, Ruhlman's hometown. He goes back to the grocers of his youth, and makes them the focal point of the book. On the one hand it is cloying, but on the other he had to make some grocer his example, so why not the chain he grew up loving? The people are dedicated, passionate and talented, and the stores are institutions. Overall, *Grocery* is a rare insight into the state of the business and the state of our food. David Wineberg

I bought this book to educate myself on the world of grocery retailing as I'm in the middle of the interviewing process with a medium-sized grocery store chain based in North Carolina (that was mentioned once in this book). I've been in retail advertising for over 20 years, working in categories of everything from lawn mowers to women's performance apparel, but never groceries. The book isn't just educational, it's thoroughly entertaining, as well. I didn't realize how much I invested in Ruhlman's relationship with his father until the last two chapters. It got me. I loved this book from beginning to end. (You'll want to google images of the Heinen's in downtown Cleveland after you're finished; it doesn't disappoint.)

In the United States grocery stores are so commonplace that we generally take them for granted and rarely think about them and just how important they are. Michael Ruhlman grew up in Cleveland with a father who loved grocery stores, and eventually took such an interest in them himself that he wrote "*Grocery*," this volume that looks at these important places from just about every angle. Ruhlman discusses some of the history of the retail food business going back more than a century. Twentieth-century giant A&P rose and eventually fell, and change in the industry has been

constant. •Walmart and Whole Foods have been drivers of change in recent decades. The author focuses on Heinen's, a Cleveland-area chain, and recalls their history in Northeast Ohio. "Grocery" notes how competition between stores and chains of stores affect decisions of individual grocers. Healthy eating is en vogue in some quarters in America today, and the author describes how chains such as Heinen's make room for healthier products on their shelves to compete with other retailers. Ruhlman talks with the consultant physician for Heinen's on a trip through the store, discussing the poor eating habits of many in the last forty or so years and how they contribute to food-related illnesses, focusing much attention on the detrimental effects of excess sugar. Ruhlman has chapters in the book about the meat, produce, and frozen foods departments, looking at the operations of each. The author also notes how food producers get their products on grocery store shelves and looks at the forces likely to change grocery stores in the near future, including the rising market for prepared foods, hydroponic farming, and the impact of .com. The book closes by discussing the opening of a new Heinen's location in downtown Cleveland and just what the opening of a sizable grocery store can do for such an urban area. This volume even goes over how groceries should be properly bagged and debunks some of the myths about how grocers supposedly try to trick customers. "Grocery" is a thorough look at a topic some might wrongly think mundane, and those of us who worked in a grocery store at some point during high school or college would find the book an especially good read.

Thrilled that a talented writer would put so much effort and polish into writing about the grocery biz. Recently employed in the industry and needed the type of info and insight embedded in this interesting and informative narrative. Writing this positive review as a small token of thanks and respect to the author. Thank you Michael! A new fan. You saved me many months / years learning about the biz side of groceries the hard way. Best, Jim from Jersey

This is a fascinating read. I loved learning about the history of grocery stores, especially the Heinam (sp) in Cleveland. I never knew how much work goes into thoughtful buying and stocking a grocery store. I loved the interview with the nutritionist and her quote "people are healthy; food is nutritious." Words to live by. I've definitely revised my buying habits after reading this book. Try it, you'll like it.

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