‘DIE FOR A SMALL PLANET’ WAS AHEAD OF ITS TIME. NOW’S MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER.

Frances Moore Lappé’s groundbreaking book helped bring plant-based dining to the forefront

By Devra First | Globe Staff

Before “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” and “The Moosewood Cookbook,” before Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods, before Clover and Life Alive and Veggie Galaxy, there was “Diet for a Small Planet.” Now, celebrating its 50th anniversary with a revised and updated edition, the book helped start a food revolution.

In 1969, a 26-year-old graduate student in Berkeley dropped out of her social work program and wrote a one-page pamphlet challenging the way America ate. Frances Moore Lappé had been researching agriculture and the causes of hunger. The population was growing, and so were fears of scarcity and famine. There was a burgeoning environmental movement in the country, and her own diet had changed, as she learned about foods like bulgur, mung beans, and tofu. Her thesis tied it all together.

“I thought that if I could write up the facts about how land and grain are wasted through a fixation on meat production, and could demonstrate that there are delicious alternatives, I could get people to question the economic ground rules that create such irrational patterns of resource use,” wrote Lappé, who would go on to cofound the Small Planet Institute in Cambridge.

It should be so easy. The pamphlet got longer. In 1971, it became the first edition of “Diet for a Small Planet,” published by Ballantine Books. The book looked at American ways of production and consumption, the nutritional and environmental ills of our diet, and came to what now seems a natural and inevitable conclusion: We needed to eat less meat. Its production was inefficient and wasteful.

It is hard to understand today how radical that suggestion was. Consumers now have an abundance of meat-free restaurants to choose from, plus vegan and vegetarian options on menus at many omnivore establishments. Meat and dairy milk substitutes are big business, with sales of plant-based food alternatives reaching $20.4 billion in 2020, with the potential to rise to $162 billion by 2030, according to research.

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When first published 50 years ago, “Diet for a Small Planet” was threatening to the meat industry because it looked at nutritional and environmental ills of our diet and called for the consumption of less meat.

“Diet for a Small Planet” wasn’t perfect. It reflected errors in the nutritional sciences of the era. It overemphasized the importance of protein. It championed sustainability, but it didn’t get central climate change. It acknowledged imperatives of change, the scope and pace of the need. It was a document of its time.

The new update delivers deeper social-justice analysis and equity, citing the work of Black and Indigenous food movements, the labor movement, and farmworkers’ organizations. It acknowledges time constraints in a society that requires many to work multiple jobs and points out the ever-growing chasm between the pay of workers and CEOs. It has more to say about monopolies, agriculture, and the influence of lobbyists. And it updates the previously Eurocentric recipes, with dishes from contributors such as Yassmin Khan, Paola Lakomski, Linn-Saman, and Barry Terry.

In short, it was subversive as the law to government. And, unfortunately, still need from this book.

In the world outside of its own, “Diet for a Small Planet” came out in 1971, eating less meat was an important choice, and the country was not yet comprehending the full environmental ills of our meat industry. We are reckoning with the myth. But Lappé refuses to be seduced by wishful thinking, despite hard work,” she writes. She thought that organic food was “one of the greatest hits to life in addition to all your early favorites. Three shows only!”

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