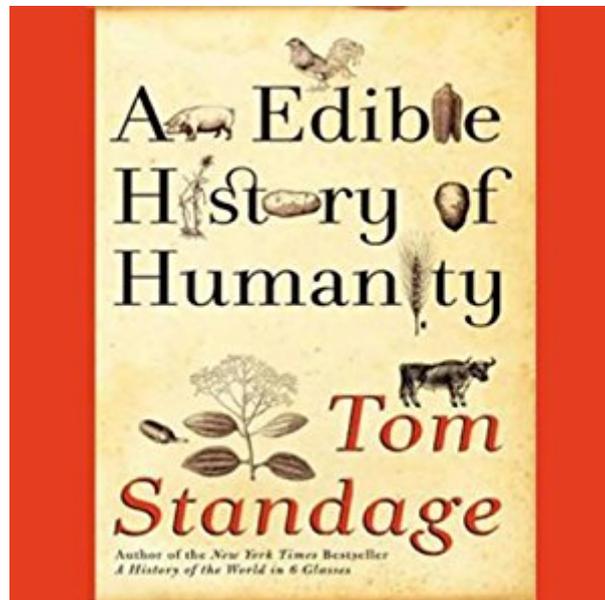


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# An Edible History Of Humanity



## Synopsis

The bestselling author of *A History of the World in 6 Glasses* brilliantly charts how foods have transformed human culture through the ages. Throughout history, food has acted as a catalyst of social change, political organization, geopolitical competition, industrial development, military conflict, and economic expansion. *An Edible History of Humanity* is a pithy, entertaining account of how a series of changes "caused, enabled, or influenced by food" has helped to shape and transform societies around the world. The first civilizations were built on barley and wheat in the Near East, millet and rice in Asia, corn and potatoes in the Americas. Why farming created a strictly ordered social hierarchy in contrast to the loose egalitarianism of hunter-gatherers is, as Tom Standage reveals, as interesting as the details of the complex cultures that emerged, eventually interconnected by commerce. Trade in exotic spices in particular spawned the age of exploration and the colonization of the New World. Food's influence over the course of history has been just as prevalent in modern times. In the late eighteenth century, Britain's solution to food shortages was to industrialize and import food rather than grow it. Food helped to determine the outcome of wars: Napoleon's rise and fall was intimately connected with his ability to feed his vast armies. In the twentieth century, Communist leaders employed food as an ideological weapon, resulting in the death by starvation of millions in the Soviet Union and China. And today the foods we choose in the supermarket connect us to global debates about trade, development, the environment, and the adoption of new technologies. Encompassing many fields, from genetics and archaeology to anthropology and economics—and invoking food as a special form of technology—*An Edible History of Humanity* is a fully satisfying discourse on the sweep of human history. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

That food looms large at the crossroads of every major event in human history may seem obvious. Everybody's got to eat, right? Wars have long been fought over arable land or better hunting grounds. Innovations in food production - from fire to farming to frozen food - spur big changes in society. Journalist and author ("A History of the World in Six Glasses") Standage takes these truisms and examines them up close, beginning with farming. Fire increased the abundance of food by making it more digestible, but farming was a mixed blessing. Yes, it allowed for increased population - predictable food supply, more babies since it was no longer necessary to carry the family from place to place - but the bigger population worked harder and was less healthy. "Compared with farming, being a hunter-gatherer was much more fun," Standage points out. Studies of modern-day nomads show they spend less than 20 hours a week on food procurement. "In effect, hunter-gatherers work two days a week and have five-day weekends." The farmers, with their monotonous grain diet, were also less healthy. Archaeological dental evidence shows that farmers suffered from nutritional stress and that height decreased 5 to 6 inches in both sexes in the 4,000 or so years it took for farming to take over the globe. So why did they do it? "The short answer is that they did not realize what was happening until it was too late." It was a gradual process, in terms of the human lifetime. That climate change played a significant role seems to be the one thing most scientists agree on.

(Based on an "Advance Reading Copy") The stories in this book slightly expand upon well-known history (high-school level) with only short excursions into the food aspects of those stories, and even some of those are part of the standard curriculum. There are lots of additional little details that make the stories lively and interesting while you are reading them, but don't add to the "takeaways".-- If you are already interested in history (like me), there is very little that you will find new or worth repeating. The extent to which the stories are pared down (omissions and over-simplifications) can become annoying.-- If you come to this book intrigued by the title but with little background in history, this level of detail is beneficial.-- If you remember only basic history, the stories provide some additional depth: "That's interesting" but not "Wow". If your only brush with the study of history has been in required courses, this is a member of a large class of books that demonstrate how

looking at events from different perspectives can be fun. However, for a much more satisfying introductory food-centric view of history and economics, I would recommend the book *Cannibals and Kings: Origins of Cultures*. The book's writing itself is very good: clear, concise and disciplined (except for the final chapter). The story-telling is well done, and my reaction in the early chapters was that stories were cut off too soon (just as things seemed to be getting interesting). Some other reviews commented on unnecessary repetition, but I didn't find it annoying.

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