



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Ugly Side of Beauty

“Although human subtlety makes a variety of inventions . . . it will never devise an invention more beautiful, more simple, or more direct than does nature, because in her inventions nothing is lacking, and nothing is superfluous.”

— Leonardo da Vinci

As we’ve discussed throughout this book, to truly understand and benefit from the secrets that Nature is so eager to share with us, we have to be willing to see with new eyes. This requires looking at the whole picture—rather than just what we see on the surface.

Let’s traipse down to the produce department to discover more secrets that are hidden in plain sight. See the lovely fruit and vegetables lined up just so? They may look appealing at first, but think about it for a moment . . . do they really look like that in Nature? Our society’s obsession with beauty (which includes our fascination with plastic-surgery-sculpted celebrities) has blinded us to yet another of Nature’s secrets: *There’s perfection in imperfection.*

Groceries Going Hollywood

The grocery store's produce section is like an Academy Awards party—a glitzy-looking group of fruits and vegetables that clean up very well. These are the “star” foods that made the cut, appearing at a supermarket near you.

Oh, look—the flawless, model oranges are posing! The scarlet apples look lip-glossed. I wonder what wax they're wearing? Who helped those voluptuous pears fit so perfectly into their containers? The peaches have such creamy skin, not a blemish in sight. The rack of melons seems so plump that I wonder if they're real. The “baby” carrots are trimmed down and cleaned up, their line-free skin looking positively Botoxed. Larger, perfectly erect carrots look ready for action. And then there are the international stars, a global mix of polished fruits and veggies from halfway around the world, including the spectacularly symmetrical kiwis sporting expensive price tags.

Wow! All these stand ready for their close-up inspection by the grocery shoppers. *Ah!* They're the winners . . . right? On the other hand, perhaps like the Hollywood stars who've been nipped, Photoshopped, and professionally made up, this star-level produce isn't what it appears to be.

I used to select only the most beautiful produce—yes, I wanted the best! Don't we all? But what's the cost to this obsession with appearance? Attention shoppers! The specials may not be so special!

Could we be buying with our eyes but missing out on things like . . . well, let's see . . . enjoying rich flavors and high-nutritional values, helping needy people, maintaining sustainability and a healthy environment, and respecting the planet? Let's look at the *gross* in grocery produce.

Stepford Chives: “Perfect,” Identical Fruits and Vegetables

Have you ever wondered how most grocery produce is uniform in size and color—and manage to slip into their perfect-sized

containers? What tree in Nature grows only ideal fruit of the same size and shape? Since when does Nature produce only uniform, flawless food?

“Grocery-store produce is so perfect—it’s not perfect,” concludes farmer Gene Etheridge of Etheridge Organic Fruit and Citrus Farms.¹ What he means is that *natural food is imperfect!* Nature creates food in all sizes and shapes, some with flaws, and numerous variations. Yet in the grocery stores, we’re seeking standardized beauty.

Early one morning in a local supermarket, I watched some of the tomatoes being neatly lined up. There was the produce guy, like *American Idol* star Simon Cowell, sizing up the veggies, picking the prettiest ones, and tossing the rest into a cardboard box for disposal. Those had made it past several inspections, but they didn’t make it into the finals.

A few days later, I was in another store where the produce guy (I’ll call him “Juan”; he prefers to be anonymous) was also tossing food into cardboard boxes. Curious, I asked what he was doing, and he said that he was instructed to throw out anything that didn’t look good and to trim any “defects.” (A defect is anything that makes the produce look “homely.”)

I asked if the food in the “reject” box was still good. “Of course. Sometimes we’ll cut up the fruit and sell it in to-go containers, but if we left the bruised fruit on the shelf, it wouldn’t sell. You can juice these carrots, and use those tomatoes for a tasty sauce,” he said, pointing to the growing pile in the discard box.

“Why not sell the ‘uglies’ for half price, rather than throw them out?” I asked.

“The store tried it, but it doesn’t work. People think there’s something wrong with it, even though there isn’t.”

“Why not give it to homeless or starving people who could use the food?”

“We’ve been given firm orders to throw the food out—even the employees can’t take any home,” Juan replied.

The garbage containers at the store are actually locked away, so I couldn’t get a photo. Juan told me that he could lose his job if

he took a picture of the private garbage. He claimed that the store worries about lawsuits and feels pressure to comply with FDA rules, so it all gets locked up and tossed out.

When I said it was wasteful to throw it out, he responded, "If you think this is bad, go to downtown Los Angeles, where wholesalers sell the food to stores. You'll be amazed by all the food that's thrown out because it doesn't *look* good—there are Dumpsters full."

Like a barber snipping away unwanted ends, he continued, saying, "Where I'm from in Mexico, we're poor, so we use *all* the food. We can't afford to just throw away something because it doesn't look good. In America, most people buy with their eyes and waste a lot. Children at my son's school take one bite of their lunch and throw the rest away." In other parts of the world, this would be unheard of.

I visited another grocery store and found a similar scenario. The produce worker was unpacking fresh food that had just arrived. His job is called "cleaning," which means getting rid of any flaws. He began tearing the outer leaves off the cabbages, tossing them in a box with the bent celery. He told me that he knows the food is perfectly good but won't sell the way it is, so he keeps cutting and peeling away. "The wrinkled tangerines are so much sweeter," he remarked, "but they won't sell because they're not pretty."

He told me that his store composts the rejected food, minimizing waste and ensuring that our future soil is healthier. Other stores don't want to bother with any form of recycling, though; they simply throw out all the rejects. In Nature, there is little or no waste, but we waste food simply because it's not aesthetically pleasing.

A friend who works at a TV studio tells me that the amount of food that's wasted on sets is shocking, saying the cooks feed the crew and sometimes have 30 or 40 burgers left over that get tossed. Likewise, in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan writes that Native Americans felt corn was sacred and would be astonished and disheartened to see modern farms leave spilled corn scattered all over the place, wasted and disregarded.

As I was reading more about Native Americans and early settlers, and their arduous struggles to find food under extreme weather conditions to survive, I became immersed in their plight. Think of

how much you would appreciate food if you had just survived a famine or a blizzard! I understood why they held food as sacred—to them, it was a gift from the heavens. Native Americans felt that eating was like making love with the planet. After consuming their food, they'd be sure to plant a seed back into the soil to show respect and gratitude.

While reading about these rituals, I lost track of time; it grew late and I was hungry. I braved the cold for a few minutes to get to my heated car to drive to the grocery store just a few blocks away. As I entered the supersized store, the bright lights and colors stopped me in my tracks. I was taken aback by the excessive abundance. I stood staring at all the washed, cleaned, and cooked food, ready for my selection. It was such an extreme display of food that I actually felt stunned and dismayed that night. I wondered what it would be like for one of my ancestors to see this loaded supermarket, then to witness the imperfect food being tossed in the garbage to rot.

That same week, I watched a video on how we need to make *more* food for starving people. I couldn't help thinking, *But what about the enormous amount of good food in farms, stores, homes, restaurants, businesses, and schools that we're throwing out each day?!* The Environmental News Service reports that *half* of the food produced worldwide is wasted. That means we're also wasting the water it took to grow the food. It's like the saying: "It's not how much you make, but how you manage the money." How are we managing our food resources?

That reminded me of crates and crates worth of scratched oranges left on paths to eliminate dust. Yes, tractors actually roll over all of this good food to juice the dirt paths to prevent dust flying into the trees. Farmer Gene Etheridge showed me a perfectly good orange that was scratched and informed me that if it were from a typical farm, it wouldn't make the grade and would be left on the ground.

Other imperfect produce is often sold at farmers' markets. What's the difference between the two? Are the stores getting the "stars," while the duds hit the outdoor markets? And if our food is so great, then why is our society riddled with obesity and diabetes? I went to my local farmers' market to find answers.