This book asks the question, “what is fresh?” It not only examines the biological imperatives that make freshness a desirable and finicky trait, but also the deeper social structure behind it. It also asks the question, “why is freshness so highly valued?” She examines history to reveal some of the answers to these questions by presenting six case studies: beef, eggs, fruit, vegetables, milk, and fish. She focuses on the United States, but also examines industries in other countries both to contrast production in the U.S., and also to show the variable reception that was given the technology that made the business of freshness profitable, namely, refrigeration.

Labeling efforts have failed in the US, because industry members cannot agree on what should be included in the definition of “fresh.” Being labeled fresh serves powerful interests by helping sell one product over another. But if too many kinds of product can be labeled “fresh,” it begins to lose potency, becomes diluted. This began to happen with the beginning of refrigeration in the U.S. in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Freidberg argues that the United States adopted refrigeration more readily than any other nation because it is geographically and climatically diverse, and many industries from dairy to beef pushed refrigeration both in distribution, to allow the undercutting of local prices by establishing nationwide (and international) cold chains, and in the home, to increase consumption at unseasonable times and places and thus increase profits.

With the advent of widespread cold storage in the U.S. in the late 1800s, two main fears were articulated over and over again by the public. First, storage allowed food “speculation,” or hoarding of food until the off-season, when prices were highest. This was feared because of its
potential to cause food scarcity and inflation. Second, storage allowed for less-than-fresh products to be kept by merchants longer in order to seek a better day-to-day price or avoid liquidating at the end of a day’s sales. The fear here was a much more clear and present danger, because cold-stored foods were often already spoiling when customers received them, and many lower-income families depended on end of the day sales for much of their food, especially meat.

Refrigeration was helped along by World War One. The high demand for beef created a market for long-distance “frigo” beef in Europe and loosened political opposition to refrigeration in general. In the U.S., eating fresh foods became suddenly patriotic, along with forgoing beef and wheat to some extent, and buying an icebox to prevent spoilage and waste. Afterward, the replacement of iceboxes with electric refrigerators heralded a change in consumer thinking: food was no longer expected to be just-harvested. While freshness remains today a quality held high by consumers—a fact that industries take advantage of when debating food labeling regulations—it is no longer expected quite in the same way that it was prior to cold storage.

For the beef industry, meatpacking became profitable with the advent of cold storage, and it fought hard to replace butchers in the United States and England especially. Consumers in these countries accepted refrigerated and frozen beef more readily than any other product, both because of its intense status connections and extremely high demand, and because of its relative durability in the cooler. The exact opposite was true of fish. Both because fish is highly vulnerable to spoilage and loss of quality in the freezing process, it became arguably the most highly prized fresh food. That is, it is prized precisely for its liveliness, its vitality, and its connection to the wild, unspoiled landscape that so many people no longer have access to, all qualities that perish along with absolute freshness. For upper- and, increasingly, middle-class consumers, it is absolutely worth it to shell out the big bucks for the freshest fish. This is why the
live-fish trade has become an incredible success, particularly in southeast Asia and Hong Kong in particular. This one niche has broken free from the power of refrigeration by utilizing biology to take care of itself—keeping fish alive, if only just, allows them to be transported long distances without losing their “vitalness” that is so important to modern consumers.

The cold-storage and transport of fruits and vegetables mainly provided opportunities for market expansion. By branding fruit and marketing it as “edible perfection,” producers finally managed to get people of every socioeconomic status to buy fresh fruit by the mid-twentieth century. But fruit remained a status symbol, albeit a diluted one, and upper-class conspicuous consumers had to be provided ever more unique and exotic fruits, such as the Montreuil photographic fruits which allowed special elite consumers to be given peaches produced specially for them, emblazoned with their portrait in the peaches’ very flesh. Fruit has remained a symbol of youthfulness because of its very perishable nature. Vegetables, on the other hand, were mainly pushed as healthful superfoods. Although the health claims of fruit likewise skyrocketed, vegetables became mainly associated with a lightening of both the diet and the workload for women. This is ironic, given the incredible labor inputs that vegetables to this day require, and to this day remain hidden from the public. Salads, and especially the chop-and-eat prepackaged iceberg lettuce, became the convenience food of the ‘20s. Since then, the increasing use of vacuum-freezing, high-tech packaging, and miniaturization (or just “babyfication”) has allowed freshness to arrive ready-to-eat in the grocery store, in mountains designed for convenience and price.

The local movement has gained headway in the last twenty years, going from a backwoods tradition to an urban elite market and, to some extent, spanning the gap between the two. Freidberg is careful to point out that local foods aren’t always the freshest, nor are they
always the most socially just (for example, Burkina Faso relies on high-value green bean exports to France for the livelihood of most of its rural poor). She does, however, end by arguing that local food is a good way to see through your food—to both protest opaque global supply chains, and be guaranteed the face-to-face accountability that makes acquiring fresh food in this way the most reliable. I agree with her final analysis of local food: that eating it does not undo history or correct social iniquities. I do believe, however, that local food has the potential to change the global market and restructure supply chains into more equitable forms that would allow economically stressed nations and populations to redevelop their own local foodways. I believe that a reversal of food globalization is possible in a healthy, just, and environmentally sound way and that it will take, at the very least, a restructuring of our own personal views of food and freshness.