



Rob Scott

Food is any nutritious substance, typically of plant, animal, or fungal origin; consumed by living organisms to provide energy, sustain life, and support growth, repair, and overall bodily functions. It contains essential nutrients, including carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, and minerals, and is crucial for survival, metabolism, and maintaining health. It is not supposed to harm the consumer.

Food that harms the consumer is generally referred to as ultra-processed food (UPF), junk food, or HFSS foods (high in fat, sugar, and salt), which are linked to chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. When food contains dangerous, unsafe, or putrid substances, the FDA defines it as adulterated food.

Anyone can learn to cook. Cooking is a skill developed through practice, patience, and repetition rather than an innate talent. By mastering basic techniques, starting with simple recipes, and committing to regular, consistent effort, anyone can become a competent home cook turning raw ingredients into satisfying and nutritious food.

1. The Reporter

Elena pulled into the gas station just off Interstate-69 in Porter, Texas. It is a small working-class community of about 40,000 residents, located just a couple miles north of Kingwood with over 100,000 residents poised to accept and to seek out wholesome foods that are in parity with grocery store prices. Of the twenty-six gas stations that exist in the area, Elena pulled into the one that had a Kowalsky Farmer Market sign on it. It was springtime in 2026, the weather was sunny, the air was crisp and people were out and about looking for something different, new and wholesome. She was there to write a piece on such a thing that Houston readers would want to read about and to enjoy for themselves.

Brian liked to hold interviews at one of his stores rather than at the farmer markets. The stores told the fuller story. The markets were romantic; wooden tables, chalkboard signs, kids running between stalls; but the stores showed what happened when romance met regulation. Fluorescent lights, coolers humming, neatly labeled shelves stocked with goods that had survived the long gauntlet of Texas law.

The reporter from the Houston Chronicle stood near the entrance, taking it all in before asking a single question. Brian noticed that habit immediately. He respected it.

“We can walk if you want,” Brian said, gesturing down the first aisle. “I talk better when I’m moving.”

“That works for me,” the reporter said. “For the record, I’m Elena Morales.”

“Brian Kowalsky,” he said. “Owner, referee, occasional villain.”

Elena smiled. “I’ve been called worse in print.”

They started down the aisle where shelves were stacked with jars of pickles, jams, and dry goods, each with clean labels and lot numbers.

“I want to understand how this works,” Elena said. “Not just the law itself, but how you’re using it. People hear ‘cottage industry’ and think it’s either total freedom or total prohibition.”

Brian nodded. “That’s because the truth is inconveniently in the middle.”

He stopped in front of a shelf of pickled vegetables. “Texas cottage food law is built around one central idea: risk. The state isn’t judging quality, skill, or intention. It’s judging how likely a product is to hurt someone if it’s made in a home kitchen.”

“So that’s where the allowed versus prohibited lists come from,” Elena said.

“Exactly,” Brian replied. “If a product is shelf-stable, low-risk, and doesn’t require refrigeration, the law is more forgiving. That’s why homesteaders can sell baked goods, jams, jellies, dried foods, spices, roasted coffee, things like that.”

“And that’s also why they can’t sell cheesecake,” Elena said.

Brian laughed. “Cheesecake breaks every rule at once. Dairy, refrigeration, high moisture, short shelf life. Same with flan, cream pies, pumpkin pie. People get emotional about those.”

They turned the corner into another aisle. This one held trail mixes, dehydrated fruits, and neatly packaged energy bars.

“Here’s where homesteaders come in,” Brian said. “Texas actually gives them more room than people realize. If you’re producing food on your homestead, you can sell a surprisingly wide range of items; as long as you stay within the cottage framework.”

Elena scanned the shelves. “But you can’t sell meat.”

“No meat,” Brian said firmly. “No poultry carcasses. Eggs are fine, but once an animal is slaughtered, it’s out. No beef jerky, no tamales with meat, no bone broth, no charcuterie boards. Seafood is the same story; fish, shellfish, anything that swims.”

“And raw milk?” she asked.

“Also prohibited,” Brian said. “Raw milk, raw milk cheese, yogurt, butter. Dairy is one of the state’s biggest red lines.”

“So how do these homesteaders end up here?” Elena asked. “In your stores.”

“That’s where the evolution of the law matters,” Brian said. “Originally, cottage producers could only sell directly to the final consumer. Farmers markets, roadside stands, direct delivery. No middlemen.”

“And you’re a middleman,” Elena said.

“I am now,” Brian said. “But I wasn’t always allowed to be.”

He leaned against the shelving. “In 2025, Texas passed SB 541. It created a new category: cottage food vendors. That’s what my stores are registered as.”

Elena’s pen moved quickly. “What does that change?”

“It allows cottage food producers to sell to me for resale,” Brian said. “Wholesale, essentially. But, and this is the part people miss, it only applies to foods that are not time and temperature control for safety. NTCS foods. No refrigeration, no freezing.”

“So, the same restrictions still apply,” Elena said.

“Correct,” Brian said. “The door opened, but it stayed on its hinges.”

They walked toward the register, passing displays of popcorn, dried fruit, marshmallow treats and dry mixes.

“For homesteaders, this matters because scale matters,” Brian continued. “Selling at a farmers’ market is time-consuming. Weather-dependent. Inconsistent. By selling through my stores, they get stable demand without having to become full-scale manufacturers.”

“But they still have to comply with labeling, sanitation, and production rules,” Elena said.

“Absolutely,” Brian said. “They have to label ingredients, disclose allergens, include their name and address, and note that the food was produced in a home kitchen not inspected by the state. Transparency is non-negotiable.”

Elena looked thoughtful. “Critics say this creates a two-tier food system.”

Brian shrugged. “We already have one. This just acknowledges it. Not everyone can afford a commercial kitchen, a warehouse license, or constant inspections. Cottage law gives people a rung on the ladder.”

“And the ladder ends where?” she asked.

“At refrigeration,” Brian said without hesitation. “The moment you want to sell ice cream, kombucha, fresh salsa, pico de gallo, fresh fruit dipped in chocolate; you’re done unless you step into full regulation.”

“But, Brian, your store is half full of refrigerators and freezers. I see bone broth, charcuterie boards, all kinds of meats; goat chops, fish and chicken. I thought those products were prohibited under Texas Cottage Law?”

Brian chuckled, “The Homesteads supplying these products are all fully licensed under the great State of

Texas. For them, it is worth the hassle to be fully regulated. Same for me. In order to sell these products, I am also bound by full regulations under Texas law.”.

They stood near the front windows, sunlight pouring in.

“It can’t be that lucrative, can it?” Elena asked. “I mean you only have six stores, right?”

Brian smiled big and let out a long sigh, “For a homestead, operating under cottage regulations, can only sell up to \$150,000 of product a year. It sounds like a lot to a normal person, but to a grocery retailer, that is nothing, it’s less than nothing! It is so small a volume that they will not even look at their products unless they can support millions of dollars of sales a year.”

“But your chain sells millions of dollars of products a year.”

“They do, about \$12 million right now, enough to support well over 100 homesteads located within 50 miles of all my present stores. You see, a homestead exists to supply the homestead with what it needs, good food, wholesome, from real raw materials. Safe from all chemicals. Raised right, on grass and pasture, not in some feed lot somewhere on glyphosate grains and steroids. They make stuff that is awesome to eat every day, I just give them a channel to sell a little extra that they produce every day anyways. And that sustains them, me, and all my customers. You probably need to see the bigger picture to fully understand what I am attempting to do out here in these parts. There are over 250,000 Texas homesteads and all of them could use a little help with extra cash. The grocery industry is a trillion-dollar industry and they sell mostly garbage packaged in pretty boxes. Homesteads make enough ‘extra’ every day to sell at 2,500 more of my convenience stores just around Texas. Hell, if that does happen, I will be a billionaire many times over! All because I gave a little

space in a convenience store to a little homestead that could.”

“What about safety?” Elena asked. “That’s the concern regulators always raise.”

Brian nodded. “And it’s a fair concern. But safety isn’t binary. Dry foods, acidified foods with a pH under 4.6; pickles, hot sauce, kimchi; those are scientifically understood. The law isn’t random. It’s conservative.”

“But sometimes absurd,” Elena said.

Brian smiled. “Also true. Pumpkin pie being illegal while creamed corn is allowed feels strange until you look at moisture content and shelf life.”

Elena closed her notebook for a moment. “What do you tell homesteaders who feel boxed in?”

“I tell them the truth,” Brian said. “This system isn’t about culinary freedom. It’s about negotiated permission. You work within it, or you invest to leave it.”

“And your stores?” she asked. “What role do they play long-term?”

“They’re a bridge,” Brian said. “Between the backyard and the grocery chain. Between informal trust and formal commerce.”

He glanced around the store. “Every jar here represents someone who wanted to participate in the real food economy without surrendering their entire life to massive supply and strict compliance.”

Elena nodded slowly. “That’s the story, isn’t it?”

Brian met her eyes. “It always is. Food is just where the law touches people most intimately.”

She extended her hand. “Thank you, Brian. This helps more than you know.”

He shook it. “Good. Because the law isn’t changing tomorrow. Understanding it is the only real power people have right now.”

As Elena stepped outside, Brian turned back to the shelves, straightening a jar that had been nudged out of line. The system was imperfect, restrictive, and often misunderstood; but within its narrow lanes, people were still finding ways to feed each other, legally, carefully, and on their own terms.

Food is the story here.

2. What is Food?

In pre-Industrial times, food and meals were counted in hours of labor, seasons of planning, and days of preservation. To understand what the American food system has become, you first have to understand what a meal was before industry touched it, when food was neither abundant nor engineered, when obesity was rare but hunger was common, and when eating was inseparable from time, work and restraint.

A Meal in 1800

In 1800, a meal was not a choice. It was an obligation. Most Americans lived rurally. Even those in towns were only a few degrees removed from farms, gardens, smokehouses, and slaughter. Food was local by default. There were no refrigerated railcars, no canned soups, no imported strawberries in winter. If you ate it, it came from nearby land or nearby water, and if it didn't come from your own hands, you knew the hands that produced it.

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A typical meal for a working family in 1800 was monotonous by modern standards but nutritionally dense: salted or smoked meat, often pork; root vegetables: turnips, carrots, onions; a grain porridge or coarse bread; occasionally beans, cabbage, or seasonal greens. Sugar was scarce. White flour was a luxury. Oils were animal fats rendered at home. Nothing was refined beyond what could be done with muscle, stone, fire, and time. The time cost of food dominated daily life. Women spent hours each day preparing meals from raw inputs: grinding grain, tending fires, rendering fat, preserving leftovers. Men spent days planting, harvesting, hunting, fencing, slaughtering. Children worked too. Everyone worked. Calories were precious. Wasting food was unthinkable. People ate until they were full when food was available, because there was no guarantee it would be there tomorrow.

A Meal in 1850

By 1850, America was changing, but food was still bound to biology. Railroads existed, but refrigeration did not. Urbanization had begun, but most cities were

still small enough that food arrived daily from surrounding farmland. Bread was baked locally. Milk was consumed quickly or it spoiled. Meat was eaten fresh, salted, or smoked. A meal in 1850 was more predictable than in 1800, but still seasonal: Spring meant scarcity, thin soups, stored grains, preserved meat. Summer meant abundance, fresh vegetables, milk, eggs. Autumn meant labor, harvest, slaughter, preservation. Winter meant discipline, rationing what you saved. Preservation defined the calendar. Drying, pickling, smoking, fermenting, cellaring, these were not hobbies or culinary trends. They were the survival technologies. Importantly, food demanded waiting. Waiting for crops to grow. Waiting for bread to rise. Waiting for meat to cure. Waiting for hunger to return. This waiting enforced natural limits on consumption. You could not snack endlessly. You could not eat without effort. You could not separate appetite from work.

A Meal in 1900

By 1900, industrialization had begun to nibble at the edges of food, but it had not yet devoured it. Canning

existed but was expensive. Refined flour was more common but still not universal. Sugar consumption had risen, but it remained a treat, not a foundation. Restaurants existed, but eating out was rare for working families. A typical working-class meal in 1900 still looked familiar: Meat once per day, often stewed; bread baked at home or purchased locally, potatoes, beans, cabbage, seasonal fruit when available. The key difference was regularity. Food shortages were less severe than in 1800. Transportation was improving. Cities could feed themselves more reliably. But food still required labor. Kitchens were hot. Ingredients were raw. Cooking was slow. Cleanup was manual. Meals were events, not interruptions between other tasks. This friction mattered.

Time and labor were natural regulators. Pre-industrial food systems had built-in brakes. You could not eat without: planning, preparation, cleanup, recovery. A meal cost time on both sides of the plate. Because of this, overeating was rare, not because people were morally superior, but because biology and labor enforced balance. Eating beyond satiety meant discomfort during work. Heavy meals slowed bodies that needed to move. Food was not optimized for

pleasure. It was optimized for endurance. Modern eaters live in a perpetual August.

In pre-industrial America, seasonality dictated not just what you ate, but how much you ate. Winter thinned bodies. Spring tested patience. Summer restored strength. Autumn built reserves. This cyclical weight fluctuation was normal. Mild leanness was common. Chronic surplus was impossible. There was no concept of “bulking” or “cutting.” Bodies adapted to availability. Obesity was rare. Obesity requires three conditions: continuous caloric surplus, minimal physical exertion, highly palatable, low-satiety food. Pre-industrial America had none of these.

Calories were expensive. Labor was constant. Food was fibrous, fatty in moderation, and repetitive. Eating past fullness offered diminishing returns. Hunger, however, was real.

Hunger existed because systems failed, seasons were harsh, and storage was imperfect. Crop failure, drought, illness, or war could push families to the edge

quickly. Hunger was episodic. Obesity requires permanence. People went hungry not because food was engineered to overfeed others, but because food could not yet be produced or moved efficiently enough.

Modern society solved hunger by breaking food.

Industrial food solved seasonality, scarcity, and labor. It replaced waiting with immediacy. It replaced preservation with processing. It replaced effort with convenience. When time, labor, and seasonality disappeared from meals, appetite lost its governor. Calories became cheap, constant, and engineered. Hunger vanished for most, but restraint vanished with it. The pre-industrial meal was not romantic. It was hard, repetitive, and fragile. But it was honest. Today's meals are garbage, but they taste good.

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