THE PRIMAL FEAST

"You are what you eat." That's the message of Susan Allport's *The Primal Feast*: Food, Sex, Foraging and Love (260pp, Harmony House, 2000). Drawing on biologists and anthropologists, and reading the nutritional stories told by ancient bones, Allport sketches food's influence over all life. She shows how it has shaped, and continues to shape, our world. How it shapes our health, values, behaviors, sexual roles, body size, brain and belly size, social structures, where we live, population limits, and how we treat nature – to name just some of the more important.

For animals, and to an extent for ourselves, some of food's roles have not changed much over time. Worldwide, humans all still need the same forty to fifty different nutrients, and can survive only on diets that provide those – something that hasn't changed much in 40,000 years. Those species which evolved with big brains (preeminently humans) have small stomachs, because they can find quality foods. Those with small brains (herbivores) need big stomachs where millions of bacteria can covert low grade foods – grass, leaves – into life sustaining nourishment.

Of 50,000 plant species worldwide, humans eat thirty. When the brain detects a bodily need – blood sugar, insulin, salt – this get translated into a desire for foods containing these. For instance, humans have, and have always had, a "fat tooth" as well as a "sweet tooth."

For omnivores, pleasure is central to eating, and variety is central to pleasure. Many primate males use gifts of food to gain sexual favors, as humans, on dates and at dinner

parties, continue to barter meat and wine for sex or friendship.

And because we share food, we can use it to control others. Our earliest ancestors used food as barter, though only among modern humans does denying food yield power – think of the great political fasters, like Gandhi.

But if some of food's effects continue unchanged, most shifted, and shifted dramatically, after 11,000 B.C. That was when humans began turning from hunter-gathering to agriculture, in all but the most inhospitable of earth's environments. After their switch to agriculture, humans had poorer teeth, lost stature and led sicklier lives. So it's worth asking what happened and why the switch was made.

Allport's answer is: because hunter-gatherers became too successful. They expanded until they filled every desirable niche on earth. Those who learned to domesticate and cultivate grains were able to pass their knowledge on. And since a cultivated acre can support a hundred times as many folks as a wild one, world population began its climb to its present dizzying heights.

With agriculture came settlement and crowding, with all their attendant ills – increased pollution, disease, famine, war, slavery, men's domination of women, and destruction of wild nature. And these continue to the present.

Allport touches on many interesting food topics – gorillas fed meat and eggs grew obese and suffered arteriosclerosis; human females, generally smaller than males, store more body fat, essential for healthy birthing; carbohydrates are the best brain foods, not proteins; the chief purpose of cooking, initially, was to detoxify foods; 90% of us are right-handed, probably because early females

carried infants in their left arms and gathered food with their right.

At the end she asks, can we super-successful food producers survive without wiping out every other life form? If we continue to need insects to pollinate crops, and plants to provide oxygen, maybe. And if we learn to adjust populations to resources, and to care about wild things for their own sakes. We learned to share food to survive; now we need to learn to share the planet.