



Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream

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“To be up on stage, shoving food in your face, beats everyday existence for most people.” —David

“Coondog” O’Karma, competitive eater

“Hungry” Charles Hardy. Ed “Cookie” Jarvis. Sonya “The Black Widow” Thomas. Joey “Jaws” Chestnut. Will such names one day be looked back upon as the pioneers of a new manifestation of the irrepressible American appetite for competition, money, fame, and self-transformation? They will if the promoters of the newly emerging sport of competitive eating have their way. In *Horsemen of the Esophagus*, Jason Fagone reports on the year he spent in the belly of this awakening beast.

Fagone’s trek takes him to 27 eating contests on two continents, from the World Grilled Cheese Eating Championship in Venice Beach, California, to Nagoya, Japan, where he pursues an interview with the legendary Takeru Kobayashi, perhaps the most prodigious eater in the world today, and to the Nathan’s Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest at Coney Island, the sport’s annual grand finale, where Kobayashi has eaten more than 50 dogs in 12 minutes. Along the way, Fagone discovers an absurd, sometimes troubling subculture on the make, ready to bust out of its county fair and neighborhood-fat-guys niche and grab a juicy piece of the big-time television sports/Vegas spectacle jackpot.

Fagone meets promoters like George Shea, the P. T. Barnum of the International Federation of Competitive Eating (aka IFOCE, “the governing body of all stomach-centric sport”) and enters the lives of three “gurgitators”: David “Coondog” O’Karma, a fiftyish, six-two house painter from Ohio who’s “not ready to become invisible”; Bill “El Wingador” Simmons, the Philly Wing Bowl legend who is shooting for a fifth chicken-eating championship despite the fact that it may be killing him; and Tim “Eater X” Janus, a lean young Wall Street trader who takes a seriously scientific and athletic approach to the pursuit of ingesting mountains of food in record-breaking times. Each in his own way feels as if he has lost or not yet found something essential in life, and each is driven by the desperate hope that through consumption he may yet find redemption, that even in the junkiest of America’s junk culture, true nourishment might be found. After all, as it says on the official IFOCE seal: In Voro Veritas (In Gorging, Truth).

With forays into the gastrointestinal mechanics of the alimentary canal (“it’s what unbuilds the world to build you,” but, hey, you can skip that part if you like), the techniques and tricks of the experienced gurgitators (pouring a little club soda on top of high-carb foods makes them easier to swallow), and the historical roots of the competitive eating phenomenon, *Horsemen of the Esophagus* gives the French something else to dislike about America. And it gives the rest of us food for thought about the bizarre and unlikely places the American Dream can sometimes lead.

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Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream Details

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From Reader Review Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream for online ebook

Carin says

A journalist, Jason Fagone, explores the world of competitive eating, nowhere exemplified better than the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest on Coney Island every 4th of July. He follows a handful of competitors - El Wingador, Coondog O'Karma, Eater X, and the current Nathan's champion, Kobayashi.

The book is fun and light and the people are highly entertaining. But I found it a bit overwritten and I didn't like how much the author inserted himself into the narrative. That's appropriate if this was either a memoir by one of the eaters, or if Mr. Fagone had become a competitor himself (a la Moonwalking Through Einstein), but for a piece of straightforward journalism, it didn't sit well with me. I also felt like he was throwing in a lot of overly highbrow cultural references, as if he were self-conscious about reporting on something so low-brow.

So while it was a fun read, I had trouble completely turning off the editor part of my brain while reading it.

Jeff says

Much MUCH better than Eat This Book: A Year of Gorging and Glory on the Competitive Eating Circuit. It contained true information, not fictional "reality TV-brand history" or marketing or propaganda. While ETB was amusing at times, it wasn't really about the people involved in competitive eating EXCEPT for the guy writing the book and the guys who control the major "gustitators association" that runs most of the big competitions. It rang false, whereas this book felt honest and was written by somebody who's also truly interested in people and why they do the crazy things they do.

Adam Coghill says

I really, really liked this book. I like that it struggles with what to make of a particularly absurd subject--competitive eating--rather than trying to prove that it's particularly awful or wonderful. Turns out it fits into the American milieu kind of perfectly. Hyper consumption. The desire of competitors to be extraordinary, to be good at something. Plus, Fagone is funny, really smart, and has a great eye for detail. My kind of writing style, definitely.

Tina says

I don't know why I picked up this book. I supposed I was just curious about how they eat all that food and

what happens to it afterwards....by the way, ewww. This book took me two years to read on and off. For such an interesting sounding subject, the book is really kind of boring. It got pretty tedious to read especially towards the end when I realized I didn't give a damn about Wing Bowl or the history of the competitive eating. It was interesting at first, but I guess the subject got to me. I just wanted to finish the book and pass it on to the book donations box. I probably would have enjoyed reading this as a magazine piece, but as a book it felt like much of it was reaching to fill the pages. I had a chuckle when I finally noticed that Elizabeth Gilbert (Eat, Pray, Love) had written a blurb for the cover.

J Danz says

This book took a subject in which I had no interest and engaged me to the point of being enthralled by the world of competitive eating. It takes a talented journalist to offer equal parts education and entertainment, and I think Jason Fagone achieved that balance. I really liked that he presented the subject as a personal journey - it helped me connect with the many people and events chronicled in the book.

Jill says

I guess after two pretty amazing books, it was a bit of optimistic of me to expect my run of good reading to stretch to three. I can devour a good book on food lit - work and other commitments notwithstanding - over a couple of days. The fact that it took me more than a week to plough through this book isn't a good sign.

On the face of it, *Horsemen of the Esophagus* has everything going for it - I mean, a behind the scenes look at the competitive eating circuit, written by a guy named by the *Columbia Journalism Review* as one of the "Ten Young Writers on the Rise"? Taking a kindly view of the book, one might say that Fagone did his best to spin 300 pages out of limited material. He admits this himself in Chapter 4, where he recounts the trip that he and Coondog O'Karma made to Japan to find out the secret to the great Kobayashi's eating success. But Kobayashi declines an interview and Fagone, attempts to pull a Rumpelstiltskin and spin a tale of gold out of straw (he fails). And so we read about how Fagone and Coondog drive each other up the wall in their tiny motel room in Japan, how frustrated Fagone is with his failed attempts to meet with Kobayashi, their meeting with Yuko, a Japanese fan of competitive eater Yukihiro Iteya (it's not even a Kobayashi fan they meet with) and Coondog's attempt to challenge some Japanese to a sushi eating contest. As Fagone admits, "[t]his is supposed to be the promised land of competitive eating, and all we can find is a sad little girl with a sad little photo album". By the time Kobayashi finally relents and agrees to meet up, it's too late. The reader is already exhausted from reading Fagone's pointless and painful account of....nothing. Not that Fagone rewards the reader for his patience; Kobayashi doesn't say very much so even the supposed highlight of the section falls flat.

Taking a less sympathetic view of the book, I'd say that Fagone scammed his publisher into thinking he had viable material for a book when he didn't; and the publisher, with a tightly written blurb and a few choice quotes ("Absolutely superb. In many ways, [Fagone] is like the young Tom Wolfe - he wants to take you somewhere you wouldn't normally go, and then, somehow, with tremendous verve, use it to explain the state of the world. He succeeds brilliantly. - *Sunday Telegraph*), scammed the reading public into thinking this would be a great read. I'm wondering at what point this Ponzi scheme will come crashing down.

I did pick up a couple of nuggets along the way. I now know that the competitive eating landscape is much

more vast than I had initially envisioned. Beyond the annual July 4 Nathan's hotdog eating contest, I learned about the insane production that is the Philadelphia Wing Bowl; I learned that there were matzo ball eating contests (they sponge up water and turn your gut into a cement mixer, apparently), oyster eating contests, shoofly pie contests in Pennsylvania (as shoofly pie is apparently an Amish delicacy), etc. I learned that there are competitive eaters other than Takeru Kobayashi. I also learned never to trust the Sunday Telegraph. Or at the very least, their book reviewer.

Ryan says

I love competitive eating, but I would've preferred a little more science, and a little less liberal arts from this book. I don't think most people read a book about champion cannoli and hamburger eaters to hear meandering poetical musings and cultural theories about America's relationship to food. Trying to fit this sideshow into a larger context turns into a fool's game for the author. I much preferred to learn about the "gurgitators" and the rival competitive eating leagues. (Yes, unbelievably, there are more than one, with different philosophies.) I will thank this book for introducing me to the spectacle of Wing Bowl, and the eating-themed rap music of Eric Booker. Also, the epilogue in Maine was perfect.

fleegan says

Obviously I checked this one out because of the title.

This is a nonfiction book about competitive eating and the people who participate. I've honestly never given a thought about eating competitions (other than something like, "why is this on the news?"), and I've REALLY never thought of it as a sport. After reading this book I'm still "meh" on calling it a sport, but i now see the completely human side of the whole thing.

The author follows around a few of the more popular eaters to see how they live. Not surprisingly, they're all very normal people. What was surprising to me was how serious they take it. Some of them are so serious about competing that they ignore serious health problems...just to defend their title.

The book was more emotional than I thought it would be because the author does a supreme job of making the eaters very human and very relatable...even though I've never wanted to eat more than 3 hot dogs at a sitting. Most of the American eaters are regular blue collar workers who just want a little bit of fame. Which is what they get....a sound bite on local news casts. It's good that most of them have great senses of humor. Oddly, it's the foreign eaters that are treated like gods in their countries. Anyway it's a wacky bit of culture that I don't get, but the book was really good and easy to get into.

Don says

I'd like to say I devoured this book - it seems fitting. But I didn't. I took little nibbles here and there. It's one of those odd Trader Joe's snacks that seems like it might be great, but is merely aaaight. Not great, not bad, so you keep on nibbling until you've finished almost the whole thing - then you throw away the last 1/10.

I can't say I learned anything new about competitive eating. I already felt it was a pointless, strange endeavor pursued by the curious and the occasional offbeat fanatic. This book reinforced that belief.

I was hoping for more content related to the digestive system - effect of rapid overeating, effect of prolonged competition, negative side-effects, etc. - but there was very little. What WAS present was fascinating; I just wish there was more of it.

Rosa says

Seriously fascinating. The author, Jason Fagone, is a wonderful storyteller and does a great job of understanding and describing his subjects - the impressive gurgitators of the world of competitive eating. The time and research Fagone puts into this book is apparent; he spent a year flying from IFOCE (international federation of competitive eating) event to IFOCE event. The two gurgitators that Fagone gets to know the best are profiled honestly, humorously, and lovingly. It's obvious that the author and his subjects have become friends over the course of the author's research.

I was suprised at how easily I got sucked in to the story of these "athletes." They work hard and train and dream, and they're just as interesting (I'd say more so, due to competitive eating's outside of the mainstream status) as traditional athletes.

The book was published in 2006, so nothing about the great upset of American Joey Chestnut over the Japanese Kobayashi in the 2007 Nathan's contest. However, the last Nathan's hot dog eating contest that Fagone profiles is the one in which Chestnut first appears on the scene, eating an impressive 32 hot dogs to Kobayashi's 49. In 2007, Chestnut beat Kobayashi, 66 to 63. I cared enough about the real people in this book that I logged on to IFOCE website to check up on them. Readers will be proud of Tim "Eater X" Janus. His goal in 2005 was 25. He ate 22 1/2. In 2007, he would eat 43 1/2.

Lauren says

I am equal parts horrified and amazed by competitive eating. It's such an incredible waste of food, and it cannot possibly be anything but unhealthy and destructive for your body, but at the same time I cannot look away.

These people have characters, shtick, and a whole tour circuit, international opponents, a federation (the IFOCE), eating contests both scheduled and impromptu, and merchandise, merchandise, merchandise! IFOCE the breakfast cereal, IFOCE the toilet paper, IFOCE the flame thrower!! Gastric reflux disease, stomach stretching, ulcers, spontaneous gastric rupture, "reversal of fortune"...

They don't just appear in Coney Island on July 4th to eat hot dogs, no, they train and compete all year. They treat it like a sport, not a hobby. They have jargon and scandal, babyfaces and heels. It is, for those who compete and follow the events, so very serious. And it all makes me very, very sick. And very, very hungry.

Jason says

I recently met the author, Jason Fagone — a smart, likable, modest guy — and wanted to check out some of his writing. I wasn't all that interested in competitive eating prior to picking up this book, but the storytelling,

writing, literary references, and historical research immediately got me hooked. His physiological descriptions of what happens to the body when we overeat are both fascinating and appalling.

Fagone straddles the line between disgusted chronicler of modern American gluttony and sympathetic ear for competitive eaters, men who have turned toward a "sport" for a moment of fame on ESPN, an escape from their banal and dreary existences. The author does a fantastic job painting vivid pictures of his subjects, detailed descriptions that are both harsh and flattering, candid yet sympathetic portraits of men who stuff their faces for our entertainment, and their egos.

In sum, the writing and tale is superb. This book does not make me want to watch competitive eating, far from it, but it does want me to read more Jason Fagone.

OK, maybe I'll watch the Nathan's Challenge on the 4th of July, but with a much different set of lenses.

Jordan says

Welcome to the cut throat world of competitive eating. These boys mean business and their records are life accomplishments to some. If I could eat 60 hotdogs in 12 minutes or 100 hot wings in 20 minutes I would respect that record and hope to god I didn't have to defend it.

The author traveled the competitive eating circuit around the United States. He profiles several "champions" and each has their own persona and motivation for competing. Some get addicted to the fanfare and victories and others chase the money. For most the results are painful competitions followed by fleeting feelings of accomplishment and a really hard way to make a living. He even travels to Japan in search of Kobayashi the fabled world champion of hot dog eating.

The author does an amazing job covering events play by play. His description of the "Wing Bowl" was so amazing I had to youtube it and I found out he conveyed the insanity perfectly. The wing bowl has all the elements for successful reality TV with winget cheerleaders, alcohol and wings. You even get to learn about "El Wingador" the defending champion as the parade of competitors begins the pageantry of the competition.

Will El Wingador defend his title this year? Will he find Kobi in his travels to Japan and learn his secrets that explain how a 130lb man can out eat 300 pounders? All this and more will be answered when you pick this book up and find yourself immersed in the world of competitive eating.

dejah_thoris says

Fagone does a great job balancing embedded journalistic narrative with a detached examination of what this new sport and trash culture in general means to post-modern America. Yes, sometimes he seems a little snobbish and judgmental of competitors who ignore the health implications of the sport, but overall I thought he was more objective than some reporters would be. The portrayals of the three eaters he follows are complete pictures of actual people with families, friends, and personal challenges. The tension between the two major competitive eating leagues is very real as is their disdain for poorly refereed events like Wingbowl. It's strange to think of a sport being created by a PR firm, but that's the story behind professional competitive eating, and let me tell you, the participants are even stranger. Part goofy American picnic

tradition, part dark soul searching for an accomplishment in a bleak blue-collar life, competitive eating both reflects and refracts our culture in unique and compelling ways regardless of what stance you take towards it.

Sarah says

Why has competitive eating attracted so many fans and so many different types of stars? Jason Fagone intends to explore these questions and more in "Horsemen of the Esophagus." Fagone contemplates the IFOCE and trails three big eating stars - Coondog O'Karma, Bill "El Wingador" Simmons and Tim "Eater X" Janus" - with appearances by Kobayashi, Sonya Thomas and many many more.

I'm not sure what to say about this. I really hate competitive eating but thought this looked interesting so I picked it up for SLIS reading group (food non-fiction). It was interesting to read but not exactly as compelling as I thought it would be. And I still hate competitive eating, so I'm not sure what the effect of my reading this was.
