

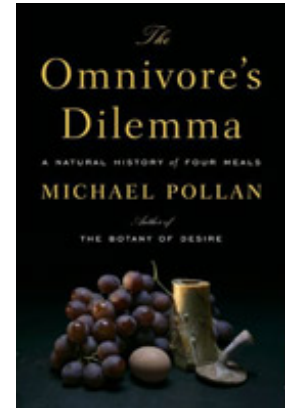


Americans, Once Again, Are Skewered for Bad Eating Habits: This Time, It's Corn

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The tired old adage, "You are what you eat," acquires new life in Michael Pollan's compelling book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (The Penguin Press). Tracing our food back to its sources in feedlots and fields, Pollan convincingly argues that modern Americans are made of corn -- and that this is a very bad thing for our health, our economy and our environment.

Industrial agriculture, Pollan explains, depends on the mass production of corn, whose cheapness the government ensures with subsidies that benefit the farmer and the food processor alike. Used to feed cattle, chickens and even salmon, corn is the raw material for much of our meat and dairy. Alternately a sweetener, a stabilizer, a thickener and an oil, corn also features prominently in our processed foods. At bottom, our milk, eggs and meat are corn; our candy, chips and soft drinks are corn; even our condiments are corn. High fructose corn syrup, a sugar substitute introduced into the American diet in the 1980s, is tucked into our breakfast cereal, our bread, even our fruit juice and health food. We each eat about 40 pounds of the stuff every year.



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According to Pollan, corn underwrites a national eating disorder. Americans' lack of a centuries' old cuisine -- a cultural anchor that provides dietary continuity over time -- makes us exceptionally vulnerable to fad diets, trendy nutritional advice and fast food.

The omnivore's dilemma -- the problem of deciding what to eat and when to eat it -- has reached truly gargantuan dimensions in our culture of culinary convenience. In America each year, \$36 billion is spent marketing food, \$10 billion of which targets kids. We have all the choice in the world and we have all the obesity, heart disease and diabetes that go with it.

We also have all the unpaid environmental debt that goes with it. Government subsidies for corn help keep our food abundant and cheap (the Department of Agriculture doled out \$37 billion for corn between 1995 and 2003), but no one is paying for the damage mass production of corn does to our environment, in the form of depleted soil, polluted water, endangered species, damaged health and petroleum consumption -- yet.

Pollan reasons outward from this nexus of nutritional, economic and environmental facts, crafting a study of American food culture that is also an argument for rebuilding that culture from the bottom up, one meal, and one eater, at a time. The book's subtitle, *A Natural History of Four Meals*, speaks to Pollan's desire to connect the vastly impersonal global processes of industrial food production to the highly personal eating habits of individuals. Pollan thus builds his analysis around a diary of progressively environmentalist eating experiments, from a McDonald's meal consumed in a car speeding down the highway; to a meal prepared from ingredients bought at America's answer to a sustainable supermarket chain, Whole Foods; to a meal made from food entirely grown in the Shenandoah Valley; to a foraged Northern California feast of wild boar and morel mushrooms hunted, gathered and prepared by Pollan himself.

Punctuated by increasingly appetizing accounts of increasingly natural meals, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is a lyrical paean to eating sustainably, a work of narrative journalism that skewers the methods of industrial agriculture while extolling the benefits and beauties of eating locally grown, sustainably produced food. Pollan balances hard-hitting accounts of industrial feedlots against pastoral descriptions of working and eating on a small, "beyond organic" farm. Along the way, he describes the vexed career of organic farming, which, in becoming legitimately big business, has acquired some disturbing resemblances to the industry to which it claims to be a holistic alternative.

Pollan engages in persuasive, sometimes mouthwatering writing. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* does make you want to reform your gustatory ways, to abandon processed food for grass fed beef and genuinely free range eggs, to plant a vegetable garden or at least to shop more wisely. But the strength of the book -- its visceral appeal to an audience of eaters -- is also its weakness.

Directed at the consumer, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* makes a powerful statement about how what we put into our bodies affects our health, environment, economy and future. From the standpoint of the producer, however, Pollan's study leaves much to be desired. There are no real answers offered for how America should feed itself without succumbing to the unpleasant practices of industrial food production. Should the United States Department of Agriculture tighten the definition of organic? Should the government stop subsidizing corn? Create incentives for corn farmers to diversify? Tax corporations that drown their products in high-fructose corn syrup and float them on a sea of petroleum? Pollan doesn't say.

That's because Pollan is less concerned with policy, ultimately, than he is with poetry. His romance with "beyond organic" farmers and maverick hunter gatherers depends on the continued, unshakeable existence of the corporate food manufacturers he so vigorously deplors. Pollan recounts their shortcomings in blistering prose, but he doesn't want to change them so much as he wants to play at getting back to nature by getting around them. His glorious descriptions of sustainable meals depend on the chilling backdrop of manure-soaked feedlots, chemically terrifying processed food and a Midwest whose rich land has been converted into a giant, petroleum-soaked corn field. The power of Pollan's vision is not one of reform, but of resistance.

This is why the book's concluding tableau centers not on policy recommendations or even on suggestions for what individuals can do to improve their diet, but on an extended, weirdly self-indulgent description of Pollan's attempt to hunt and gather the "perfect" -- but also perfectly impractical -- meal. This is also why Pollan's argument must finally be taken with a grain of salt.

Food for Thought

Pollan fails to acknowledge important counterarguments, such as those offered by Henry Conko and Gregory Miller in *The Frankenfood Myth: How Protest and Politics Threaten the Biotech Revolution*. Conko and Miller argue that industrial food production -- especially that centered on "Bt corn" -- actually protects us from food poisoning, cancer and birth defects caused by all-natural contaminants such as molds, bacteria and viruses. They also show how political pressure to avoid chemically-enhanced food has resulted in some foods being less safe. McDonald's, Heinz and Gerber, for example, have decided not to use cost-saving, healthier ingredients in order to avoid public outcry at their non-natural origins; significant liability issues surround their expediency. Barron's listed *The Frankenfood Myth* as one of the best books of 2004.

As Miller and Conko suggest, there are some costly philosophical shortcuts enabling arguments such as Pollan's. Whole Foods Market CEO John Mackey's response to *The Omnivore's Dilemma* underscores this suggestion.

Early in the book, Pollan describes a shopping trip to Whole Foods in which he buys the ingredients for a family meal. Although he enjoys the shopping trip and cooks a tasty dinner from Whole Foods' stock,

Pollan's bottom line on Whole Foods is clear. Whole Foods is a sellout, a corporate enterprise centered less on actual sustainability than on carefully orchestrating consumers' pastoral impression that they are shopping sustainably.

Shortly after *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was published, Mackey posted a letter to Pollan on the Whole Foods website. Mackey took issue with Pollan's glib dismissal of Whole Foods as part of an environmentally irresponsible movement to mass market food that may be organic in name, but which is produced in ways that are fundamentally contrary to the spirit of sustainable agriculture. Noting that Pollan did not seek to interview anyone at Whole Foods, Mackey explains how Whole Foods works to ensure that its extraordinarily successful enterprise is founded on strong support for local growers.

According to Mackey, decentralized management makes the most of regional farming strengths; each Whole Foods store is thus as unique as it is consistent with the company's mission. Within this model, Mackey adds, Whole Foods must accommodate the gap between consumer expectations and availability; as seasons and regions vary, so do Whole Foods' patterns of importation and distribution. A \$5 billion business that the *Financial Times* has called the "fastest growing mass retailer in the U.S.," Whole Foods is pioneering the economic ways and means of a nutritionally optimal future.

To his credit, Pollan responded to Mackey with civility and modesty, encouraging Whole Foods to use its considerable power to influence the American diet for good. But Mackey's criticisms mark the disappointingly oversimplified quality of Pollan's reasoning at precisely those places where more subtle, searching thought is required. Pollan is masterfully able to negotiate complex ideas when it suits him -- the set piece where he reads Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*, while eating a steak is case in point -- but it did not suit him to do so when the issue was the pressing, pragmatic one of how to feed America sustainably. And that is as telling as it is disappointing.

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