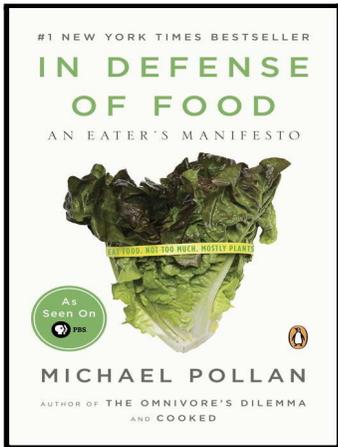




In Defense of Food Reader's Guide

BOOK BUZZ



In Defense of Food
By Michael Pollan
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[A Penguin Random House Reading Group Guide](#)

Questions and Topics for Discussion

Introduction

One does not necessarily expect books about food also to be about bigger ideas like oppression, spirituality, and freedom. Yet Michael Pollan has always defied expectations. To be sure, his two most recent books, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*, celebrate the pleasure of eating. However, Pollan also serves up something far more potent: a pointed and thorough critique of how the food industry, the government, advertisers, and, yes, even Pollan's fellow journalists have turned the process of putting food on our tables into an increasingly dysfunctional enterprise. With insight, gentle firmness, and even some well-placed humor, Pollan observes how modern farming is at war with the needs and dictates of nature, how the nutritional policies of the government have rebelled against sound scientific practice, how even the consumer has been divided against himself and that eating has ceased to be for many of us a source of enjoyment and has become instead an occasion for uncertainty, anxiety, and guilt. Within Pollan's jeremiads there is also a persistent core of hope. While never flinching in his critique of the way things are, Pollan constantly encourages us to think of how things might be.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan guides the reader through an extensive tour of food production in America, tracing a series of food chains from the seed to the table. In the harrowing first part of his story, he takes us to a massive farm in Iowa, where the formerly



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diverse yield of hay, apples, hogs, and cherries has given way to a vast monocultural enterprise, in which, thanks to government subsidies and a seemingly perverse set of economic principles, corn is king. With a sparkling analysis that adroitly weaves history, science, and sociology, Pollan shows how America has bent its priorities in the service of this single crop, converting it into ethanol, the now-ubiquitous high fructose corn syrup, and even disposable diapers. We discover how the monoculture of corn has impoverished the soil and the people who work it, how it has imperiled the health of the cattle industry (steers are naturally ill-suited to digest grain, but we feed it to them anyway), and how it has led unsuspecting consumers to trade nutrition for cheap calories. Pollan next transports us to a small, ecologically balanced farm in Virginia, where the chickens and cattle roam more freely, and animals and humans alike reap the benefits of a natural food chain based on grass. Finally, in perhaps his most radical encounter with the world of food, Pollan resolves to prepare a meal that he has hunted and gathered by himself. As he stalks a feral pig, dives for abalone, and wonders whether that mushroom he has picked just might kill him, we rediscover food not merely as a physical source of life but as a medium for holy communion with nature and one another.

In *In Defense of Food*, Pollan transitions boldly from narrative to polemic. Taking on a scientific, governmental, and commercial establishment that has focused on individual nutrients rather than the unique benefits of whole foods, Pollan offers three gentle commandments: Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants. Tautly written and eloquently argued, *In Defense of Food* shows us how simple—and how strangely complicated—those three little rules can be.

About Michael Pollan

Born in 1955, Michael Pollan grew up in Long Island, New York. He was educated at Bennington College, Oxford University, and Columbia University, from which he received a master's degree in English. A former executive editor of *Harper's Magazine*, he is currently the John S. and James L. Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. His essays have been widely anthologized, and he is a regular contributor to *The New York Times Magazine*. He is the author of five books, including *A Place of My Own*, *Second Nature*, and *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* was named one of the ten best books of 2006 by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Michael Pollan lives in the Bay Area with his wife, the painter Judith Belzer, and their son, Isaac.



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A Conversation with Michael Pollan

Q. First off, what is the omnivore's dilemma?

When a creature can eat a great variety of things—as we humans can—the question of what you *should* eat becomes tricky, and is often fraught with anxiety. This is not a problem for specialist eaters—cows eat only grass and have no worries when it comes to determining what they should and should not eat; their culinary preferences are hardwired in their genes. The same is true for the koala bear: if it looks and smells like a eucalyptus leaf, it is lunch, and everything else in nature is not lunch. But if you're an omnivore things get complicated, especially when nature—not to mention the supermarket—offers so many possibilities, some of them nourishing but some of them apt to shorten your life.

Humans have evolved a whole set of cognitive tools to help navigate the omnivore's dilemma—big brains with fine powers of recognition as well as memory to help keep all the potential foods and poisons straight. But perhaps the most important tool we have for dealing with the challenges of being omnivores is culture: we have traditions around food and eating that guide us in our food selection and preparation—such as the knowledge it's okay to eat morels, but only after they're cooked, and that it's not okay to eat that other mushroom over there, the one people call, rather helpfully, the “death cap.” Where the koala bear has genes to tell him what and what not to eat, we have (or I should say, *had*) taboos, mothers, and national cuisines.

Q. Are you saying that we no longer have cultural guides to help us make the best food choices?

This is what inspired me to write this book—the fact that, as a culture and as individuals, we no longer seem to know what we should and should not eat. When the old guides of culture and national cuisine and our mothers' advice no longer seem to operate, the omnivore's dilemma returns and you find yourself where we do today—utterly bewildered and conflicted about one of the most basic questions of human life: What should I eat? We're buffeted by contradictory dietary advice: cut down on fats one decade, cut down on carbs the next. Every day's newspaper brings news of another ideal diet, wonder-nutrient, or poison in the food chain. Hydrogenated vegetable oils go from being the modern alternatives to butter to a public health threat, just like that. Food marketers pummel us with messages that this or that food is “heart healthy” or contributes to good “mental function” (whatever that means). But what clinched it for me was watching how, in 2002, a great spasm of Carbophobia seized the American diet and the most wholesome and wonderful food of all—bread!—a food which had been revered as a staple of human life for tens of thousands of years came to be regarded as



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a virtual poison. Almost overnight, it disappeared from dinner tables across America. Bakeries went out of business! This, it seemed to me, was the sign of a nation in the grip of a collective eating disorder.

Without a stable culture of food to guide us, the omnivore's dilemma has returned with a vengeance. We listen to scientists, to government guidelines, to package labels—to anything but our common sense and traditions. And so the most pleasurable of activities—eating—has become fraught with anxiety. The irony is, the more we worry about what we eat, the less healthy and fatter we seem to become. Think of it: a notably unhealthy population obsessed with eating healthily—it's the American Paradox.

Q. You look at the three food chains which sustain us: industrial food, organic or alternative food, and food we hunt and gather. In industrial food, corn is king. Why is corn so important to the modern food industry?

To try to understand how we got into this predicament, and how we might get out of it, I decided to do some detective work, tracing a handful of the most common foods in our diet back to their source in nature. I quickly realized there are several different food chains in America, but the biggest and most important food chain—the one that feeds most of us most of the time—is based on a remarkably small number of plants, most notably corn. This was a revelation to me: if you follow a Big Mac or a Coca-Cola or a Twinkie or a box of breakfast cereal or virtually any snack food or soft drink back to its ultimate source you will find yourself, as I did, in a cornfield somewhere in Iowa. Corn is what feeds the steer that becomes the beef; is refined into the high fructose syrup that sweetens the soda; is shaped into the Fruity Pebbles or distilled into any one of the hundreds of food additives in our processed foods. Of the thirty-eight ingredients in the chicken nugget, no fewer than eighteen of them come from corn. The Mexicans have always called themselves “the people of corn” but in fact, now, it is we Americans who deserve that label—without even realizing it we have become the corniest people on earth.

That's not just a conceit, either. If you take a snip of hair or a nail clipping from an American and run it through a mass spectrometer, as I have done, you will discover that most of the carbon in his or her body (and we consist mostly of atoms of carbon) originally came from corn. We're even cornier than the Mexicans, who still sweeten their sodas with cane sugar and feed their cows on grass. As the biologist who did some of these experiments for me put it, “to the machine, we look like corn chips on legs.” This plant has not only colonized our land—80 million acres of it—and our food supply, but it has literally colonized our bodies.



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Q. What are the implications of eating so much corn?

There are several reasons it's not a good idea to base your whole diet around a single species. First, we are omnivores, designed by evolution to consume a wide variety of nutrients and micronutrients. The need for a diverse diet is built into our biology, and there are all sorts of important nutrients we simply can't get from corn. To turn a bushel of corn into so many different foods involves a lot of processing, and processing diminishes the nutritional value of any food. We're finding that people who eat an exclusively fast food diet (highly processed corn-based food) not only get fat but are actually malnourished, because they're not getting the essential micronutrients present in fruits and vegetables. Overweight inner city kids are showing up in health clinics with rickets!

Second, growing all that corn is disastrous for the environment. Corn is, as farmers say, a greedy plant, requiring more nitrogen fertilizer than any other crop—nitrogen that runs off the fields into the water and has created a “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico that is now the size of New Jersey. It also requires more pesticides, so all that corn we're growing is polluting the environment. Feeding livestock corn on feedlots produces huge amounts of pollution too, not to mention misery in animals which, like the cow, were never designed to eat a corn diet. It makes them so sick we have to feed them antibiotics.

Finally, it's never a good idea to put all your eggs in one basket, as the Irish learned in 1845 when the Potato Famine hit. The Irish had a relationship with potatoes much like our relationship with corn—it was the mainstay of their agriculture and their diet. Monocultures are inherently precarious, which is why you don't find them ordinarily in nature. When blight hit the Irish potato crop, it was decimated overnight, and a million Irishmen starved. We're tempting fate by basing so much of our food supply on a single plant. A more diversified agriculture would be much more secure as well as healthier.

Q. You point out that there are now alternatives to industrial food, but they can be somewhat bewildering as well.

The corn-based industrial food chain does some things well—it has given us an abundance of cheap food. But an increasing number of Americans recognize the exorbitant costs of cheap food, both to their health and to the environment. In the shadow of our fast food nation, alternative food chains are springing up: organic food companies, Community Supported Agriculture (subscription farms where consumers pay an annual fee to get a weekly box of fresh produce), farmer's markets, and metropolitan buying clubs.



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Organic is the biggest and most visible of these alternatives: a food chain that uses no synthetic chemicals and takes much better care of the soil. It was built by farmers and consumers, with no help from the federal government whatsoever. And there's a growing body of evidence suggesting that organic food is not only better for the environment, but may be better for our health too—not just because it is free of pesticide residues, but is also more nutritious.

However, as organic becomes big business, it risks repeating some of the mistakes of the industrial food chain. Not only is organic junk food creeping into the supermarket but a lot of the marketing is misleading. The consumer looking at the pastoral labels, with the happy cows in verdant pastures and free-ranging chickens, can be forgiven for not realizing that there are now organic feedlots and organic factory farms—oxymorons I wouldn't have thought possible till I saw them for myself. These days we're also shipping national brands of organic produce all over the country at a tremendous cost in terms of energy. For every calorie of pre-washed organic California lettuce eaten in New York, fifty-six calories of fossil fuel energy have been burned to process it and get it there. More and more organic food is coming all the way from China. So industrial organic is a mixed blessing: a definite gain for the land where it is grown, a likely gain for the eater's health, but if you care about the waste of energy, and about saving local farms and farmers, you may want to think twice about buying organic from the supermarket, and consider going, as some farmers now say, "beyond organic."

Q. Such as buying food from sustainable farms. Can you tell us a little about these?

The word sustainable is overused these days, but spend some time on a well-managed farm, as I did, and you see how different it can be. A sustainable farm is one that draws food from the earth without diminishing it—creating more energy, in the form of food calories, than it consumes, in the form of fossil fuel. Sad to say, many organic farms are far from sustainable, and the most sustainable farm I found—Polyface Farm in Virginia—is not officially organic. But here pigs get to live like pigs, chickens like chickens, and cows like cows—each according to their nature, and in a symbiotic relationship. When cows graze well-managed pastures, and are followed in those pastures by chickens (who eat the insect larvae from the cow manure and fertilize the grass), it's good for the animals and good for us, too. For it turns out that not only are you what you eat, but you are what you eat eats too. A farm like Polyface demonstrates there is a free lunch in nature: a way to feed ourselves without either emiserating animals or diminishing the earth. Indeed, this is a farm where the topsoil actually increases every year.



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Q. Is food more than a health issue?

As Wendell Berry once said, “eating is an agricultural act.” I would add that it’s an environmental and a political act as well, for how we choose to eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Nothing else we do has as profound an effect on the health of the earth, not to mention that of our bodies. I would also say food is a national security issue. One-fifth of the fossil fuel we consume goes to growing, processing and shipping our food—more than we consume driving our cars. We won’t get a handle on energy and global warming until we change the way we feed ourselves. Another reason food is a national security issue is that a highly centralized food system, in which 90 percent of our food chain passes through a half dozen corporate hands, is dangerously vulnerable to contamination, whether by terrorists or microbes. But what is so striking about food as a political issue is that this is one issue where all of us can make a difference—even more than our votes, our food choices can make a tremendous difference on critical questions about energy, the environment and the economic health of our communities. How we choose to eat represents one of the most powerful, and hopeful, votes we have to cast.

Q. How can the typical consumer navigate the marketplace to find the healthiest food?

People often ask me what they should eat, but I usually answer their question with another question. What matters to you? What values do you want to support with your eating decisions?

If you’re worried about pesticides, then buy the certified organic, by all means. If you care about preserving farms where you live, then buy local. Farms don’t just give us food; they give us a certain kind of landscape, and the only way to preserve that landscape is by supporting those farms. If you care most about your nutrition and health, then fresh locally grown food is more important, so shop at the farmer’s market or join a CSA. When it comes to meat, you can do a lot better than organic—look for grass-finished beef at the farmer’s market, or pastured chicken and eggs, or milk from cows that get to go outside and eat grass. How can you know? Talk to farmers, visit their farms, or get on the Web—you’ll be surprised how many interesting possibilities there are today within a short drive of your home. Yes, buying food this way takes more time and effort than buying everything at the supermarket—but I would disagree this is “work.” Going to the farmer’s market, meeting farmers and learning what to do with an unfamiliar vegetable, is one of the most pleasurable things I do every week—ininitely more stimulating than going to the supermarket. The industrial food chain has convinced us that shopping for and preparing food and eating together at a table is an unbearable burden and inconvenience; that message might be a



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good way to sell convenience food, but it's simply not true. These are some of the greatest pleasures in life!

Q. But isn't eating this way terribly expensive?

The deeper I delved into the industrial food chain, the more I realized how expensive cheap food is, if you do a true accounting. That 99 cent fast food burger is cheap at the register, but its true cost—to the environment, to your health, to the taxpayer—is unimaginably steep. First, there's the corn it took to feed the steer, corn grown with vast quantities of fossil fuel and pesticide and chemical fertilizer. There's the subsidies paid to the farmer to grow the corn—\$5 billion a year. Then there's the military spending to keep the oil flowing to grow the corn to feed the steer to make the burger. And then there's the cost to your health of eating that high-fat corn-fed beef, which must also be given antibiotics so the animals can tolerate its corn diet—yet another cost to public health, in the form of antibiotic resistance. So cheap food is actually astonishingly expensive.

I prefer to buy honestly priced food, food that isn't being subsidized by the taxpayer, public health, or the environment. It's true that not everyone in this country can afford to buy honestly priced food—and we need to find a way to put healthy food in reach of those people. It's a crime that the cheapest calories in the supermarket are the least healthy ones: added sugar (from corn) and added fat (from corn and soybeans). But that's because we subsidize those calories—by paying farmers to grow more corn and soybeans than we need. Why don't we subsidize the healthier calories over in the produce section?

The majority of us, though, can afford to spend more for honestly price food. Americans spend less than 10 percent of their disposable income on food—less than any people on earth (the French spend 20 percent; the Chinese 50 percent), less in fact than any people in history. Why is it we understand “quality” when it comes to a car or television set but not when it comes to something as important as what we eat? Why do we assume that a five-cent egg, from a factory farm where the chickens lived in battery cages, had their beaks clipped off to prevent them from cannibalizing one another, and were fed pig meal, is the same product as a thirty cent egg from a chicken that lived outdoors and got to eat grass and insects as it was designed to do? For all the difference in taste and nutritional quality, these might as well be two completely different foods.



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Q. At the end of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, you cook a meal that you personally hunt, gather, and grow. What was the most challenging moment for you?

Shooting a wild boar and then eating it. I'd never hunted before, and wasn't sure I could enjoy eating an animal I had killed and butchered myself.

Q. And the most surprising moment?

Just how much I enjoyed it. My adventures in hunting and gathering were challenging, but deeply gratifying. You realize that we still possess this marvelous set of tools allowing us to track and hunt an animal, or to spot a mushroom and then determine whether it's nourishing or deadly. To prepare a meal literally from scratch, even just once in your life, to follow a food chain all the way from the earth to the table, is to be reminded of something fundamental and beautiful but easily forgotten in our fast food world: that, whatever we choose to eat, we eat by the grace not of industry or the supermarket, but of nature.

Q. *In Defense of Food* is a very evocative title. Why do we need to defend food?

We need to defend food - by which I mean real food as opposed to processed foodlike products - because it is under attack from nutrition scientists on one side and the food industry on the other. Both encourage us to think in terms of nutrients, rather than foods, and both benefit from widespread confusion about something that should be quite simple: deciding what to eat.

Nutrition scientists are invested in the nutrient-by-nutrient approach because it's easier to study simple nutrients rather than complex whole food. The food industry has a problem with traditional foods because it's much more profitable design novel food products. So the manufacturers add complexity and convenience and do just about everything to our food except leave well enough alone. In fact, the scientists and the manufacturers are often allies. Both promote this idea that nutrients matter more than foods. Typically, the nutrition scientists highlight some amazingly important new nutrient, and then the manufacturers rush to reformulate food products to have more of that nutrient so they can slap a health claim on it.

Q. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was published in 2006. When did you start writing *In Defense of Food* and what was the impetus behind it?

I started researching *In Defense of Food* immediately after publishing *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. As I traveled across the country talking about that book, I found that readers were, first, astounded to learn what they were eating, and second, eager to know how they might change the way they eat. I was surprised to discover how confused so many of us are about



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this most elemental of creaturely activities: figuring out a healthy diet. So I began researching the whole question of food and health to see if I could come up with a few simple rules of eating. To my surprise, I discovered that the scientists had less to teach us about eating healthfully than I expected—that the science of nutrition is still a very primitive science—and that there is a much more reliable source of wisdom on the subject. That wisdom is in the form of traditional foods, cuisines, and food cultures, which are the product of hundreds, if not thousands, of years of trial and error figuring out how to keep people healthy using whatever grows in a specific place. Culture has more to teach us about how to eat well than science. That was a big surprise to me.

Q. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* clearly struck a nerve with readers. It not only was a national bestseller and named a best book of the year by five publications including *The New York Times*, but it also galvanized a new national conversation on food, as evidenced by regular news articles and food pieces that cite your book. Did the response surprise you?

I was flabbergasted by the response. It told me that the culture was ready to have a new conversation about food and that people were deeply troubled by the American way of eating. You never know when you start a book just where the culture will be when you finish it. But between the obesity epidemic, food safety issues (like E. coli and mad cow disease), concern about animal welfare, and a growing recognition that the American way of eating is making us sick, people seem ready to take a good hard look, both at the system as a whole and, even more important, at their own approach to food. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was very much about the food system; this book is about the individual eater—and we don't have to wait for the system to change to change the way we eat. As a matter of fact, by changing the way we eat, we'll not only be healthier, but our food dollars will bring about change in the larger system. This is one of those cases where the personal is political, and to do the right thing for yourself is to do the right thing for the land, the farmers, the animals. We don't get too many opportunities like that.

Q. You call *In Defense of Food* a manifesto and indeed it is much more opinionated and programmatic than your other books. Was it difficult for you to write this way?

It was actually surprising easy to write this way. Since *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, I've been engaged in a kind of conversation with my readers, both in person and online, and this book flowed naturally out of that give-and-take. It's a conversational book, both in tone and in conception. Researching *The Omnivore's Dilemma* gave me a thoroughgoing education in how the American food system works, so the question naturally arises: what are the practical



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implications of that knowledge for how one should eat? What I learned fundamentally changed the way I eat; this book is my attempt to share that with readers.

Q. What is “Nutritionism” and why is it good for the food industry but bad for our health?

Nutritionism is the predominant ideology about food in America. It’s not a science but a set of unexamined assumptions about food that shape our thinking about it without our even being aware. The first assumption is that a food is a collection of nutrients, and that it’s the nutrients that matter. Since nutrients are invisible—or visible only to scientists—it follows that we need expert help in order to eat properly. So nutritionism underwrites the power of nutrition scientists and food scientists and government—the implication is, it’s so complicated we can’t eat without their help and advice. Another equally destructive assumption of nutritionism is that the whole point of eating is to advance our physical health. This is a very narrow and novel idea that, ironically, has done nothing to improve our health. To the contrary, our obsession with eating healthy—with nutritionism—has coincided with a decline in dietary health—with the explosion of obesity and diabetes over the past twenty-five years. Nutritionism is ruining our health, not to mention our meals.

One of my goals in *In Defense of Food* is to offer the perspective of the visitor from Mars, the outsider who can step back and recognize the absurdities of nutritionist thinking, and remind people it wasn’t always this way, that eating is also about pleasure and community and engaging with nature, and that we can escape from the straitjacket of nutritionism. This is why I believe it’s much to my advantage I have no professional training in nutrition. That training is an indoctrination in nutritionism.

Q. How is the “Western Diet” making us sick?

We don’t know, exactly. What we do know is this: the Western Diet is responsible for the fact that people who eat as we do—lots of refined carbohydrates, lots of processed foods and meat, lots of everything except fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—suffer much higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and other diet-related diseases than people who eat any number of more traditional diets.

We *don’t* know the exact mechanism by which our diet is making us sick—whether it’s all the fat in the diet, the meat or the refined carbohydrates, or the sheer abundance of calories. Scientists disagree. But this uncertainty need not hang us up. We don’t need to know why this is happened to know that it is happening and, very simply, that if we’re concerned about our health we should and can stop eating this way. Because we also know that by escaping



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from the Western Diet we can reverse the health problems associated with it. This is stunningly hopeful news. Let the scientists argue about what in the Western diet is making us sick. Much more important is to simply stop eating that way.

Q. You boil down your advice for better eating to seven words: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” It sounds simple but how do you apply that advice in today’s culture of fast food and packaged food?

The challenge is to know what food is and isn’t, because if you’re eating food, you’re probably going to be okay. In *Defense of Food* offers several handy tests for distinguishing between food and food products. For example, if your great grandmother wouldn’t recognize something as food, it probably isn’t. If it contains more than five ingredients, or contains high fructose corn syrup, or has ingredients you can’t pronounce, it probably isn’t food.

Fortunately, there is still plenty of food in the supermarket if you know where to look for it. You find most of it on the perimeter of the store—the produce, meat, fish, and dairy sections. The processed and packaged food fills the middle aisles. So for starters, shop the periphery of the store and stay out of the middle. But, even better, get out of the supermarket entirely whenever you can. At the farmer’s market you’ll find nothing but real food—nothing processed, nothing hydrogenated, no high-fructose corn syrup. You can’t go wrong.

There are similar rules for how to eat “mostly plants” and “not too much”—for example, eat at a table; you’re much more likely to snack and binge when you eat alone in the car or in front of the TV.

Q. You recommend shopping at farmers’ markets or joining a CSA (Community Sponsored Agriculture) where you get a share of a local farmer’s produce on a regular basis. But is this practical for most people in this country? What if you don’t live in an area that doesn’t have these opportunities?

It’s true that not all of us have the option of forsaking the supermarket for the farmer’s market or CSA. But farmer’s markets are the fastest growing segment of the food marketplace today, so if there isn’t one in your area, there will be soon. But as I mentioned, there’s still real food for sale in the supermarket—and increasingly, there’s organic and local food there too. There’s plenty of real food at Whole Foods, of course, and even Wal-Mart is now selling organic food. If it’s not available locally, you can order excellent grass-fed meat over the Internet. We have more choice than we’ve had in at least a generation.

As I was writing the book, it occurred to me that offering the same advice thirty or forty years ago would have been crazy. To eat the way I propose would have meant leaving civilization,



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going back to the land to grow your own food. In the 1960s there was virtually no way to get wholesome food that had been well grown in healthy soils without going to great lengths or growing it yourself. Back then, this book would have been the manifesto of a crackpot!

We're blessed to be living in the middle—or perhaps near the beginning—of a revolution in the way our food is produced and sold. Consumers have demonstrated to producers that they're willing to pay a premium for food that is grown and prepared with care. The good news is that finding real food is only going to get easier in America.

Real food is, it must be said, often more expensive and often takes more time to prepare than fake food. So eating well is not just a matter of shopping differently. It means living differently too. It means being willing to—gasp!—cook. There's no question that eating well means putting more into food—more money and more time. But the half-century-long experiment in outsourcing food preparation to corporations has failed us. Also, I think we've been sold a bill of goods when food marketers suggest we're too busy to do anything but buy their processed products—I don't buy this idea we don't have time to cook, or that cooking is so incredibly difficult it's best treated as a spectator sport on television. Or that we don't even have time to eat meals, so buy our car-friendly food products. This is such a crock! You can put an excellent meal on the table in twenty minutes. The fact is, people find the time—and the money—for the things they value. We have been devaluing food, with disastrous results for our health and our happiness. What we need to do is put food back where it once was: a little closer to the center of a well-lived life.

Q. You're not a fan of the “low-fat” diet. What's wrong with it?

For starters, it was based on faulty science. To demonize fats is to demonize an essential—not to mention very tasty—nutrient. The habit of demonizing one nutrient and elevating another is nutritionism at its worst, and leads to food fads and food phobias—to neurotic eating. Now we're demonizing the carbohydrate and rehabilitating fat. These swings of the nutritional pendulum are destructive of both our health and happiness. Whatever nutrient we've decide is “good” we end up eating in excess. That's why the food industry loves “low fat” or “low carb” equally well—they become an excuse for eating and selling more food.

Q. What's your favorite weekday meal to cook for your family and how long does it take you to make it?

My favorite weekday meal in the summer would be local salmon grilled on the barbecue with vegetables from the garden—grilled summer squash or broccoli or eggplant. With that we



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might have soba noodles or rice. And of course wine! We can get a dinner like that on the table in twenty minutes, tops.

In the winter, we make a lot of soups and stews. These take a little longer: maybe an hour of cutting and chopping at lunchtime, and then a long, slow (unattended) simmer during the afternoon. This will give us at least one dinner plus a couple of lunches, so the minutes-per-meal is actually quite low.

Discussion Questions

1. Michael Pollan approaches eating as an activity filled with ethical issues. Do you agree that the act of eating is as morally weighty as he says it is? What questions concern you most about the way you eat or the way your food is created?
2. Some readers might argue that Pollan's ethics do not go far enough, perhaps because he does not urge us all to become vegetarians or possibly because of the zeal with which he pursues the feral pig that he kills toward the end of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Did you find yourself quarreling with any of Pollan's ethical positions, and why?
3. Pollan argues that capitalism is a poor economic model to apply to the problems of food production and consumption. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
4. Pollan also shows a number of instances in which government policies have apparently worsened the crisis in our food culture. What do you think should be the proper role of government in deciding how we grow, process, and eat our food?
5. How has Michael Pollan changed the way you think about food?
6. At the end of *In Defense of Food*, Pollan offers a series of recommendations for improved eating. Which, if any, do you intend to adopt in your own life?
7. Which of Pollan's recommendations would you be least likely to accept, and why?
8. Do you think that the way Americans eat reveals anything about our national character and broader shared values? How is Pollan's writing a statement not only about American eating, but about American culture and life?



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9. In both *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*, Pollan quotes the words of Wendell Berry: "Eating is an agricultural act." What does Berry mean by this, and why is his message so important to Pollan's writing?

10. In each part of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan has a particular friend to help him understand the food chain he is investigating: George Naylor in Iowa, Joel Salatin at Polyface, and Angelo Garro in northern California. Which of these men would you most like to know personally, and why?

11. What, in the course of his writing, does Michael Pollan reveal about his own personality? What do you like about him? What, if anything, rubs you the wrong way?

12. If Michael Pollan were coming to your place for dinner, what would you serve him and why?



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