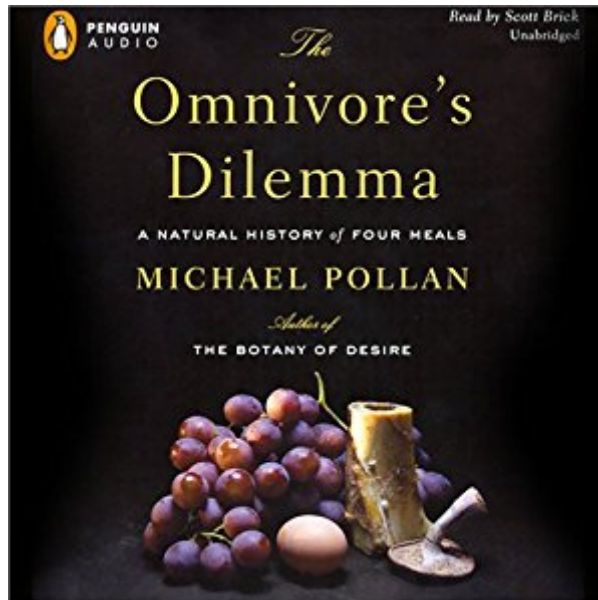


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The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History Of Four Meals



Synopsis

"What should we have for dinner?" To one degree or another this simple question assails any creature faced with a wide choice of things to eat. Anthropologists call it the omnivore's dilemma. Choosing from among the countless potential foods nature offers, humans have had to learn what is safe, and what isn't-which mushrooms should be avoided, for example, and which berries we can enjoy. Today, as America confronts what can only be described as a national eating disorder, the omnivore's dilemma has returned with an atavistic vengeance. The cornucopia of the modern American supermarket and fast-food outlet has thrown us back on a bewildering landscape where we once again have to worry about which of those tasty-looking morsels might kill us. At the same time we're realizing that our food choices also have profound implications for the health of our environment. The Omnivore's Dilemma is bestselling author Michael Pollan's brilliant and eye-opening exploration of these little-known but vitally important dimensions of eating in America. Pollan has divided *The Omnivore's Dilemma* into three parts, one for each of the food chains that sustain us: industrialized food, alternative or "organic" food, and food people obtain by dint of their own hunting, gathering, or gardening. Pollan follows each food chain literally from the ground up to the table, emphasizing our dynamic coevolutionary relationship with the species we depend on. He concludes each section by sitting down to a meal— at McDonald's, at home with his family sharing a dinner from Whole Foods, and in a revolutionary "beyond organic" farm in Virginia. For each meal he traces the provenance of everything consumed, revealing the hidden components we unwittingly ingest and explaining how our taste for particular foods reflects our environmental and biological inheritance. We are indeed what we eat—and what we eat remakes the world. A society of voracious and increasingly confused omnivores, we are just beginning to recognize the profound consequences of the simplest everyday food choices, both for ourselves and for the natural world. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is a long-overdue book and one that will become known for bringing a completely fresh perspective to a question as ordinary and yet momentous as What shall we have for dinner?

A few facts and figures from *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*: Of the 38 ingredients it takes to make a McNugget, there are at least 13 that are derived from corn. 45 different menu items at McDonald's are made from corn. One in every three American children eats fast food every day. One in every five American meals today is eaten in the car. The food industry burns nearly a fifth of all the petroleum consumed in the United States— more than we burn with our cars and more than any other industry consumes. It takes ten calories of fossil fuel energy to deliver one calorie of food energy to an American plate. A single strawberry contains about five calories. To get that strawberry from a field in California to a plate on the east coast requires

435 calories of energy. Industrial fertilizer and industrial pesticides both owe their existence to the conversion of the World War II munitions industry to civilian usesâ "nerve gases became pesticides, and ammonium nitrate explosives became nitrogen fertilizers. Because of the obesity epidemic, todayâ™s generation of children will be the first generation of Americans whose life expectancy will actually be shorter than their parentsâ™ life expectancy. In 2000 the UN reported that the number of people in the world suffering from o... --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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Customer Reviews

When I bought this book for my dad he simply said, "A book about food?" I laughed and tried to tell him it is probably more about what is wrong with the country (government, business, foreign policy) than it is about food. I heard Michael Pollan speak on NPR about this book and that sparked my interest. He was railing against corn as he does in the first section of the book here: For instance, I had no idea we used so much fossil fuel to get corn to grow as much as it does. The book provides plenty of other interesting facts that most people don't know (or want to) about their food. 1) We feed cattle (the cattle we eat) corn. OK. Seems fine. But I never knew cows are not able to digest corn. We give them corn so the corn farmers -who are protected by subsidies and at the same time hurt by them - can get rid of all the excess corn we produce - (more of the excess goes into high fructose corn syrup which is used in coke and many other soft drinks). This sees company owned farms injecting their cattle with antibiotics so they can digest the corn. Not just to shed farmers' excess corn but to also: a) Get the cow fatter in a shorter amount of time because . . . b) A cow on this diet

could really only survive 150 days before the acidity of the corn eats away at the rumen (a special cow digestive organ FOR GRASS, not corn).c) Also the pharmaceutical companies get big profits because they manufacture large amounts of antibiotics for these large mammals.All this may lead to increase in fat content and other peculiarities in the meat we eat.2) The amount of fossil fuel we use to grow food is ridiculous and helps keeps the Saudis happy.

Since I read Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation" over five years ago, I have refused to eat any fast food of any kind. Both morally and nutritionally, my position is that if I were to eat that food again, I would be tacitly accepting an industry that is abhorrent on so many levels. Knowing what I now know, that degree of cognitive dissonance is simply too great for me to overcome. When my son was born two years ago, my thinking about food choices returned and has become an important part of my day-to-day consciousness. When I first read about "Omnivore" online, I found the premise compelling. What exactly am I eating? Where does it come from? Why should I care? Exactly the kind of book that I'd been looking for, especially as I try to improve my own health and try to give my little guy the best start in life. I bought the book as soon as it came out and found it to be highly enjoyable, yet almost mind-numbingly disenchanting. We all know about corn and cows and chickens and how the government subsidizes their production (mainly through corn subsidies). But Pollan has given me a completely new view of corn, its processed derivatives, and secondarily, has made me rethink my view of the farmers growing this stuff and the industries who buying it. There is so much wrong with this picture. Corn, in the wrong hands, can be used for some terrible things, among them high fructose corn syrup (a major player in the obesity epidemic) and as feed for cows (who get sick when they eat it, requiring anti-biotics!). I can't compartmentalize anymore, just because meat tastes good. As Pollan clearly outlines, there is a very selfish reason why the beef industry doesn't want us to see inside a slaughter house.

I didn't expect to learn much from Michael Pollan's new book, The Omnivore's Dilemma - since I write and talk regularly about the problems of industrial agriculture, local food production and sustainability, I thought that while I'd probably enjoy his writing (I took a great deal of pleasure in his prior books on gardening), his book would be enlightening to a rather different audience than myself. But, in fact, I did learn a great deal. Pollan's gift is to entertainingly present complexities, without being weighed down by his own excellent scholarship - it is a gift, to know that much about something and to know which bits of evidence will compell and which will merely bore. He's an enormously erudite guy, without being even slightly dull. Several people I know who are far less

engaged by food issues than I say they found it compelling and readable. I will add up front, that one of the two things that most irritated me about this book was that in the mid-1980s, Margaret Visser, a brilliant food writer, wrote a very similar book, *„Much Depends on Dinner“*. Neither the book nor the author were particularly obscure - the book won several awards, and Visser went on to write another one about table manners (great book, btw, and highly recommended), and the books were published by Pollan's own publisher. And yet, Pollan's book does not cite or acknowledge the book, even though many of the chapters (those on chicken and corn especially) were very similar in their approach and analysis. Someone, either Pollan in his research (which, I think, was otherwise good), or his editor missed something - because the concept of eating a meal and being outraged by the history of its context is not his.

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