

## Eating With Your Head: A Review of 'The Omnivore's Dilemma'

by Hank Stewart

Corn is evil. Years from now, when senility has fully set in, that will be the one thing I remember from Michael Pollan's book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. In fact, now every time I shuck an ear, I look for the 666 birthmark.

Pollan spends the first quarter of his thorough and (sometimes overly) reflective book explaining how a seemingly innocent giant tropical grass like *Zea mays*, a healthy staple of summer picnic tables across America, has come to be such a menace.

Pollan claims that of the 45,000 items available in the average American supermarket, over a quarter of them contain corn. "Corn is what feeds the steer that becomes the steak. Corn feeds the chicken and the pig, the turkey and the lamb, the catfish and the tilapia..." he writes. "The eggs are made of corn. The milk and cheese and yogurt, which once came from dairy cows that grazed on grass, now typically come from Holsteins that spend their working lives indoors tethered to machines, eating corn."

In the processed food arena, corn is the major player, found in many of the unpronounceable ingredients you have to put on your glasses to read: high-fructose corn syrup (since the 1980's, the primary sweetener for virtually all sodas and fruit drinks), modified or unmodified starch, glucose syrup, maltodextrin, crystalline fructose, ascorbic acid, lecithin, dextrose, lactic acid, lysine, maltose, MSG, polyols, caramel color, xanthan gum. You get the picture. But just in case you don't...

"Corn is in the coffee whitener and Cheez Whiz, the frozen yogurt and TV dinner, the canned fruit and ketchup and candies, the soups and snacks and cake mixes, the frosting and gravy and frozen waffles, the syrups and hot sauces, the mayonnaise

and mustard, the hot dogs and the bologna, the margarine and shortening, the salad dressings and the relishes and even the vitamins."

And don't even get this guy started on chicken nuggets.

The problem with corn is the economics of it (okay, there are other problems, too, but this is the big one). Today a bushel of corn sells for just over \$1, yet costs over \$2 to produce. One corn farmer Pollan spends time with refers to corn as a "welfare queen." Yet more and more American farmers are dedicating more and more of their acres to growing corn, dumping "cheap corn" on an already saturated market. To explain how this came to pass, Pollan traces the economic history of corn from the dustbowl days, through the great depression and FDR's New Deal program to help stabilize the corn market to offset the devastating effects of an off year. He follows corn policy into the Nixon administration when Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz began to systematically reshape government farm subsidies from protecting the farmer to protecting the crop.

This sort of exploration is found throughout *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Pollan isn't just writing about food. His book is full of history, economics, chemistry, philosophy, anthropology, botany, biology and even a touch of adventure. Every topic Pollan raises, he plumbs with great depth. (The one exception being the health risks of high-fructose corn syrup, which he off-handedly and irresponsibly dismisses as uncertain.)

Pollan seeks to explain what he calls our "national eating disorder." He believes this is in part the result of the fact this country lacks the deeply

rooted culinary traditions of most European and Asian nations. He states, "A country with a stable culture of food would not shell out millions for the quackery (or common sense) of a new diet book every January. It would not be susceptible to the pendulum swings of food scares or fads, to the apotheosis every few years of one nearly discovered nutrient and the demonization of another. It would not be apt to confuse protein bars and food supplements with meals or breakfast cereals with medicines. It would probably not eat a fifth of its meals in cars or feed fully a third of its children at a fast-food outlet every day. And it surely would not be nearly so fat."

The book is a look at the origins of four meals derived from what Pollan calls "the three principle food chains that sustain us today: the industrial, the organic, and the hunter-gatherer." (The organic gets two meals.)

Without going into detail here (which Pollan does religiously), reading about the industrial meal (starring evil corn) will give you serious second thoughts about every food purchase you will make for the rest of your life. (It's already affecting me.) The first organic meal will give both reassurances and doubts about buying organic groceries at

Whole Foods and—I can't believe I'm writing this—Wal-Mart. The second organic meal came from Pollan's efforts at a fascinating small farm in Virginia, Polyface Farm. This section was the most intriguing of the book. Polyface's owner, Joel Salatin is an inventive and opinionated character, and the way he runs his farm gives you hope that there could be a viable answer to the downward spiral of industrial food. The final meal is Pollan's most self-indulgent. He learns how to gather mushrooms and kill a wild pig. He then brings them all back home, and serves "the Perfect Meal," complete with a flourish of northern California pretense.

*The Omnivore's Dilemma* gives its reader, especially those who might be Awakening Consumers, much to digest (pun intended). While in many cases relating to food, one might feel inclined to blindly sit down at the table and not ask questions. Ignorance is bliss. (This is especially true for haggis.) But in the long run, most Awakening Consumers (and thinking people in general) realize, whether they want to admit it or not, knowing how that meal on your plate got there—and its associated costs—is a good thing. To the diner unafraid to embrace the truth about his or her food, Pollan serves a complex and satiating entrée.