

Mmmm. Everything looks so delicious. Tough to decide. Okay, let's see... I'll have the petroleum special, with a side of coal, and if it's not too much trouble, some oil to dip it in. Thank you.

Sound familiar? Probably not. But, unless you're Little Miss Environmentally Perfect and you let nothing but local, organically farmed food touch your lips, chances are you've been eating fossil fuel for years—and asking for seconds. You just haven't necessarily looked at it that way.

Well, put on the energy goggles, and you'll see: Collectively, we've become an insatiable beast. About 20 percent of total energy used in the U.S. is attributable to the production and supply of food. If that doesn't impress you, consider that it takes approximately 10 calories of input energy to create just one calorie of food. It doesn't seem like a sustainable ratio, if you ask me. On top of this, experts predict that rapid population growth will cause the caloric needs of the planet to soar by 50 percent in the next 40 years, and we may see the return of famine. Yes, famine, a word we've largely forgotten in this country due to the widespread availability of cheap food.

Madonna may have convinced us that we're living in a material world, but the reality is that we're living in a world of cheap soy- and corn-based processed foods by way of a myopic agriculture industry and cheap beef, chicken and pork products by way of an unethical meat industry—both of which are subsidized by the government.

Maybe that's why 65 percent of Awakening Consumers believe the U.S. consumes too much energy-producing food, according to a survey conducted by your friends at g-Think. Even if you eat mainly organic foods and humanely-raised meat, even if you're a co-op devotee, you're still part of the larger cycle. You'll still be confronted with a food-energy conundrum every time you go to a

grocery store—even a cute little organic one—and get tempted by papayas or kiwi or something else that has to be shipped in from afar just so you and millions of others can have a wee taste of tropical fruit. As author Joan Dye Gussow points out: “It costs 435 fossil-fuel calories to fly a five-calorie strawberry from California to New York.” Knowing these numbers and knowing that they don't add up to anything good for the planet or for us personally, how do we justify eating two-thirds of the things we do? It's enough to drive us all bananas.

Other than resigning ourselves to a lifetime of fasting, which obviously wouldn't be sustainable or fun, what's an energy-conscious omnivore, carnivore or herbivore to do? We all know that these sorts of existential-disguised-as-rhetorical questions are never very easy and sometimes not even possible to answer, but here are three thoughts for you to mull over (I would say over a glass of mulled wine), but it's not quite the season for that yet).

Get Real

Biologically, food is just supposed to be something to sustain us, to give us enough energy to keep breathing, moving, living. But, over the years, it's become an indulgence for most and an emotional crutch for some. If 65 percent of Awakening Consumers say that eating is more about enjoyment than reenergizing, then the average American is probably far over on the enjoyment side of the spectrum. The thing is, it's perfectly fine and understandable to find joy in food—even cavemen must have smacked their lips as they roasted boar on a spit—as long as we find an equilibrium between how much energy our food production consumes and how much food we consume to maintain our own energy. We've all felt the lead-bodied, brain-dead sensation of “food coma” whereby you take in too much food and it effectively zaps your energy. Overeating is almost like sending too many volts of electricity through a

circuit breaker—it blows the fuse. But do we fully understand the amount of energy we're wasting by overeating?

Get Dirty

It's time to put down the remote and pick up the trowel. Stop watching the TV, and start watching our gardens grow. A friend of mine who recently moved to Tanzania was reminded of how detached she and most of us Americans have become from our food when, upon moving into her rented housing, she looked out the back window and discovered that she was suddenly the owner of a chicken coop and several chickens. She had no idea whether to feel blessed or cursed. In other parts of the world, people are forced to take much greater responsibility for their food sources. We're slowly, very slowly, moving that way. Already 47 percent of Awakening Consumers grow some of their own food. And if Michelle Obama's vegetable garden is any indication of a wider trend, then we should begin to see more people understanding the value of planting and harvesting their own food. Really, it's the natural thing to do. At our core we are hunter-gatherers who were meant to lounge around in fields, not spas.

Get Credit

Thanks to the stimulus package, there are tax credits galore for new insulation and windows, geothermal heat pumps, solar water heating, hybrid and diesel cars, wind generators... the list goes on and on. But what about backyard gardens? Why no tax break for all those good souls out there with dirt under their fingernails and calluses on their thumbs from pulling the weeds out of their tomato beds? This is a country built on capitalist principles and motivated by the bottom line, so if there were to be an actual monetary incentive for people to grow their own food, then we'd surely begin to see Americans across all socioeconomic, demographic and psychographic groups digging, planting and reaping what they sow. Because 50 percent of Awakening Consumers feel that they pay too much for food, a garden credit seems like a reasonable way to address economic tensions while spurring a new generation of healthy, happy, energy-efficient citizens.

So, what's for dinner?

Sources: Sustainable Table, Science Daily, Change.org, U.S. Department of Energy, Food Inc.