

OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (450pp, Penguin Books, 2006), can be read as a morality tale, with a bad angel (industrial agriculture) on one shoulder, and a good angel (local grass farming) on the other. Here they vie, not for our souls, but our bodies. The bad angel whispers, "cheap food, novelty, endless variety, summer all year long." The good angel answers, "sustainability, healthy bodies, a healthy earth, high quality, seasonality."

Industrial agriculture depends on monocultures (its "Original sin"), huge feedlots, vast surpluses of cheap corn & soy, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and antibiotics, subsidies, swift worldwide distribution, and eaters willing to ignore their meals' origins and true costs.

Local grass farming depends on sustainable polycultures – grass, clover and animals enriching each other – idealistic farmers, and consumers wanting meals of the highest quality whose origin is chemical-free, local, and transparent, if not cheap.

The other two of Pollan's "four meals" derive from industrial organic and hunter-gathering. Industrial organic's virtue is that crops, fields and workers are not drenched in agro-chemicals. Its drawbacks are dependence on monocultures, heavy use of fossil fuels for transport, and treatment of animals that's scarcely better than industrial agriculture's. It depends heavily on "supermarket poetry," whose pastoral scenes seldom match reality.

Hunter-gathering, seems to be in the book for contrast – to picture the simplest path from food source to table.

Pollan hunts and kills a wild pig, gathers wild mushrooms and abalones, cherries from a neighbor's yard and vegetables from his own. This is "the perfect meal," though few of us will ever experience it.

So I'll stick with my bad and good angels as (for me) the vital center of the book. The first results in a MacDonald's take-out eaten in a car, the second in a locavore feast with friends.

Much of industrial agriculture's story centers on corn. Since the price of a bushel (pre-2006) was a dollar less than it cost to grow it, Pollan asks why anyone would bother. It's because the food giants' technicians discovered that immense profits, for everyone except farmers and workers, could be wrung from a mountain of reliably cheap corn. It could be transformed into beef, chickens, salmon, ethanol, plastics, soft drinks and much, much more. Therefore, subsidize the corn itself, give the farmers and workers enough to keep them alive and producing, and rake in the profits.

The results? Huge outputs of fossil fuel, steadily deteriorating soil and water quality, an epidemic of obesity, cheap processed foods for everyone, and corn fed salmon less healthy than a pepperoni pizza – to name a few.

And since our population grows relatively slowly, the challenge is to get folks to consume more and more. This the food giants do by spicing everything with corn-derived sugar or fat – the two things our brains are evolutionarily wired to yearn for – and reconfiguring processed foods endlessly, to keep us interested. The bad angel's message is powerful indeed.

Local grass farming in contrast depends on a carefully thought-out system where everyone – farmer, consumer, farm animals, fields, the environment – is healthily and sustainably nourished. 100 acres of well managed grass can produce 25,000 pounds of beef, 50,000 pounds of pork, 12,000 broilers, 800 turkeys, 500 rabbits, and 30,000 dozen eggs a year – and the grass will be healthier at year's end, ready to repeat the process.

So why aren't there thousands of such farms? Because their profits are modest, and go to the farmers and workers. The industrialists can neither control nor make a profit out of them.

Yet here's healthy living for everyone and everything involved, the good angel says.

And the omnivore's dilemma is: who shall I listen to?