

IN DEFENSE OF FOOD

During the last half century Americans have largely ceded control of their diets and eating culture to nutritionists, industrial agriculture, marketers and government agencies.

During the same period we've become the fattest and least healthy people on the planet.

Michael Pollan, in "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto" (244pp, Penguin Books, 2008) explains how this happened, why we shouldn't let it continue, and what we can change to make us healthier.

Our faith in scientific expertise put us into the hands of the nutritionists. They taught us to think about nutrients – fat, carbs, protein – which they could manipulate, in place of foods, which they could not: think margarine, endlessly transformable, vs. butter, salted or plain. And since nutrients are invisible, for the first time in the history of eating we needed experts to guide us along the supermarket aisles and at table. At the same time a few giant corporations took over the growing and marketing of our food, and so of course offered whatever was most profitable, not necessarily what was healthiest for consumers.

Hence was born the "Western diet," largely refined flours and sugars processed from corn, wheat, rice and soy, grown rapidly in vast monocultures fed with industrial fertilizers. Such processed food is easier to store and ship if you take the nutrients out and leave the calories in. So we've become "overfed and undernourished," co-creators of a system that offers each of us 3900 calories a day and 170 new "food" products a year.

Why did we let this happen? Our evolution has taught humans avidly to seek the flavors associated with sugars, fats and salt, relatively rare in nature, but easy for processors to reproduce. So once they learned to extract sugar (our brain's favorite food) from grains, Pandora was out of her box. We'd become addicts of the Western diet and were literally dying for the next meal.

In 1950 we spent twice as much on food as health care; by 2000 we'd reversed the ratio. Worldwide people can live healthily on all kinds of traditional diets – almost all protein and fats, almost all vegetables, etc. – but not on the Western diet of refined flours and sugar. Nutritionists take surveys, we lie about what and how much we eat, and such flawed science decides the largest questions of health and diet. And because the brain takes twenty minutes to register a sense of being full, we rarely stop eating for that reason – we've already cleaned it up long since.

So Pollan advises us to get off the Western diet. “Thirty years of nutritional advice have left us fatter, sicker, and more poorly nourished.”

Fortunately there are now alternatives, including organic meat and produce, CSA's (community supported agriculture), farmers' markets and a swelling number of backyard gardens. Here are some of Pollan's rules of thumb for kicking the Western diet.

“Eat food (rather than processed, foodlike products). Not too much. Mostly plants.” Consider meat as a side dish. Avoid anything your grandma wouldn't recognize, anything that won't rot, that makes health claims, that has more than five ingredients or contains high fructose corn syrup. Shop the edges of the supermarket, not the middle,

and get out of it whenever you can, to the farmers' markets, CSA's, your garden. Eat slowly, always at table, and never alone.

How you eat may be as important as what. So "choose quality over quantity, food experience over mere quantity." Animals feed; humans eat, or dine.

Before you order that Big Mac, visualize the huge, filthy feedlots, the downers, the slaughterhouses, the workers living on speed. Then for contrast, visualize a steer browsing peacefully in a green pasture.