

Michael Pollan's simple secrets to better eating

By Margo True

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Best-selling author Michael Pollan talks about real food, his new book, and why grandma was right

What inspired your new book, *In Defense of Food* ?

It grew out of my last book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* . Readers were saying, 'Okay, you're telling me where my food comes from, and I'm kind of alarmed to hear this. Now how do I eat?' So I came up with a couple of rules that don't tell you what to eat but how to think about eating.

A few of the rules:

Don't eat any food your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. And these seven words: Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

How do you define "food"?

I have a very simple food pyramid. There's food, and then there's processed food. I cut out all the processed food, so my pyramid is more of a stump. How can you tell when something is heavily processed? If it has more than five ingredients, it's probably not food.

What's better, eating organic or eating local?

It's a false choice. We should be striving to have both. Many small local farms are organic in everything but name; they've simply chosen not to be certified organic by the government.

How does the average person afford farmers' market produce?

Shop strategically. Buy things at the height of the season. There are a couple of weeks when tomatoes are really cheap.

What about growing your own food?

I just put in my garden last spring. I ripped out my front lawn and put in vegetables. I grew string beans, carrots, broccoli, three different kinds of kale, cucumbers, lots of herbs, potatoes, chard. And this garden is only 10 by 20. The most local food of all is food you grow yourself.

What did you eat for breakfast today?

Whole-wheat toast and a persimmon scone, which I split with my wife, from the farmers' market. I had the toast with bright yellow butter — from Jersey cows — that I also got at the farmers' market. It was delicious.

If you stress quality in your food, you don't need as much quantity to be satisfied. A little butter goes a long way if it's really good.

The myths of eating organic:

I think the myth people have in their heads is that when they're eating organic, it's coming from a small family farm; it's been grown in their pastoral image of what a farm should be like. I was surprised when I started investigating to find that, at this point, for better and worse, organic agriculture is big and industrial and looks a whole lot like conventional agriculture.

It is a better product because it's grown without synthetic chemicals and there's more care for the land, but these are huge factory farms too, very often.

And so some of the benefits that are in people's minds about supporting family farmers and supporting farm workers are not necessarily there.

And something like free-range organic chicken — the image you might have about birds wandering around outside — that's not necessarily what that really means. There's a door on the side where they could go outside for a couple of weeks of their lives if they chose to.

The best chicken I've eaten is chicken that spent most of its life on grass, from a very young age, and ate grass and bugs. It's unparalleled. Completely different. You'll have beautiful orange eggs, and they'll stand up really tall in the pan. 'Eggs with muscle tone,' as a farmer once described them to me.

The dangers of "nutritionism":

Nutritionism is the ideology of food in America today. It's our unexamined assumptions about food, one of which is that nutrients matter more than foods. You reduce a muffin to how many grams of fiber, how much cholesterol, and so forth, and the reason it's a poor way to think about food is that it encourages us to think about food as medicine rather than as pleasure and culture.

Obsessing about food and health doesn't necessarily make us healthier. It's what I call the American Paradox.

Also, as soon as you think about food in terms of nutrients, then you need 'experts' to tell us how to eat. They're invisible and unseen, these nutrients.

Nutritionism mystifies food; it makes it scary and intimidating and confusing.

This vocabulary of nutritionism has insinuated itself into every corner of our lives, and it's just confusing us. We need to turn it off. And how do we know what these words mean? What is cholesterol, anyway? It's Greek, literally ... I'd need to double-check that. [Editor's note: It is Greek.]

I have a much broader view of health. Eating socially is healthy too. People who eat with other people tend to eat more slowly, and the longer you have to eat, the more time you have to register that you're full. Also, you're less likely to binge if you're eating with other people.

And nutritionism assumes we know what nutrients are, when in fact we have a history of overlooking one nutrient after another. We thought fat was evil. Then we learned that omega-3s were good for you.

Now omega-6 is maybe not so good for you. Lycopene and resveratrol are on our radar screens now. What will be on the radar screen 20 years from now? To me, nutrients are like the medieval humors — choleric, phlegmatic, and so on.

We once thought they explained human health. Well, you can eat very well without understanding how nutrients work, just like you can have a baby without needing to know everything about that process.

The true cost of food:

Keep in mind that processed food has so many more steps built into it that it ends up not really being so cheap. If you buy fresh food and get a few meals out of it — like stews — you can still do quite well.

It's a matter of priority: Are you willing to put the time in? There's also an access issue: A lot of people don't have access because of where they live. But, increasingly, farmers' markets are coming into the inner city, into places where people are underserved by supermarkets.

And there are farmers' markets that price differently in different markets — there is a market in West Oakland where they charge wholesale prices.

But there's no question that healthier food costs more, in general, than processed food. But you pay the cost of that cheap food eventually, in health.

One of the most astonishing statistics I came across: The amount of money we spent on food, when I was a kid, in the 1960s, was 18 percent of our income. Now we're down to 9.5 percent, so it's dropped in half.

Over that same period, our spending on health care went from 5 percent to 16 percent. As the amount we spent on food went down, the amount we spent on health went up.

So you either pay by eating good food or you pay with your health. It's a very short-term view to say this food is cheaper. If you calculate the real cost of cheap food, it's exorbitant — because of all the costs to your health, to the environment, to the workers, to the animals. It's actually very expensive.

The so-called high price of food at the farmers' market — you have to realize that's the real price. That's the real price of food when you're not borrowing from the future, from your health, from the environment, from the workers.

There are people who can't afford to spend more money on food. Probably 10 percent to 20 percent of the population. But for the rest of us, it's a matter of 'What do we value?' For the same reason people tell you they're too busy to cook.

Well, you know we found time in the last 10, 20 years to put 3 hours a day into the Internet. The day is still 24 hours long. Where do we get that time? We just decided it mattered, so we borrowed the time from other places.

So I'm convinced that, for most of us, the issue is, 'Is food important enough to justify the time and money it takes to do it well?'

I think we've had this experiment in outsourcing our food preparation to corporations for 40 years now, and the quality of the food isn't that good, what it does for our health isn't that good — and I think people are bored with it.

It's one of the reasons they're going to the farmers' market. They realize that this food really tastes better. It tastes like something more than salt.

Why he likes grass-fed meat:

Several reasons: All you have to do is go to a feedlot and you will realize that this is not how these animals have been designed to live. They're unhealthy. They're sick animals. It's just not appealing. Whereas I've also been to ranches where the animals are on grass, and you can tell.

I don't know cattle, but I can look at a cow and see a cow that's content and happy and has a beautiful slick coat. It's also a much more sustainable and safe food chain. It's a solar-based food chain. The sun is feeding the grass, the grass is feeding the ruminant, and the ruminant is feeding us. It's a very sustainable way to eat.

I also have come to really like the taste of grass-fed beef. It leaves you feeling less full. If you eat a heavily marbled steak, you feel muzzy after you eat it. There's something very clean about grass-fed meat, and it's often beefier in flavor. It's harder to grow well, and I've had bad grass-fed beef, and there is a lot of bad grass-fed beef around. But when it's done well, I think it's far superior to corn-fed beef.

I really like Marin Sun Farms. They're in Point Reyes [California] but also sell at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market [in San Francisco], and they sell in a couple of other markets too. [Rancher David Evans] does a really good job, and he's repping other ranchers. He doesn't grow it all himself. Mac Magruder is a very good rancher whose beef he sells.

It's not local, but there's a brand from Uruguay that's quite good now, called Estancia — you see that in the market. You know, the South Americans really know how to do this well. It's very lean meat, very good.

I also think it's healthier. There's less saturated fat, more omega-3s, more beta-carotene. There are also more vitamins because the animals are eating grass. In the same way that we don't get the nutrients we need through corn, they don't either. And green plants are very valuable sources of the things we need to eat. Health, environment, taste — there are a lot of reasons for eating it.

I've had La Cense beef, out of Montana, and it's good. There's also Panorama, a California company.

The perils of "low-fat":

I don't like low-fat products. What do they have to do to the products to get the fat out? It's often adulterated in various ways. Milk's a good example. If you look on the label of, not all, but many skim and low-fat milks, you'll find that where there once was one ingredient, there's already a couple of extras that they add — vitamin A and vitamin D. Now you'll see dried milk solids or milk powder.

Now 'evaporated milk' is a questionable substance; it contains oxidized cholesterol, which is much worse for you than other kinds of cholesterol. In the interests of getting that low-fat milk, we're adding something potentially hazardous. So some manufacturers then add antioxidants to the milk, ratcheting up the complexity of this product. Suddenly it's not food. It's not what milk was and is meant to be.

Low-fat yogurt has a dozen different ingredients in it to give it the texture of full-fat yogurt — the carrageenan, the xanthan gum — plus all the flavorings. That should be called 'imitation,' but it's not. We changed the laws a few years ago so they don't have to say it's 'imitation.' We used to have these laws ... so we had real butter and 'imitation butter.' And now that's gone. So now we're left to our own devices to figure out what's real food and what's fake food.

Margarine is the great case study. My mother used to say, as a joke, 'They're going to discover that butter is better for you than margarine.' And lo and behold, once we learned about trans fats, which margarine was full of, we learned that trans fats were much worse for us. So that's another piece of advice: Listen to your mother.

On science, grandmothers, Dr. Spock, and common sense:

As I studied this whole question of food and health, one of the most surprising things I learned was that culture may have more to teach us about how to eat well than science. We assume that when it comes to our health that science has the last best word. But when it comes to food, so far scientists have not served us well.

The low-fat craze for the last 30 years is a classic example. America got much fatter during the low-fat craze because they started eating too many low-fat products, because we overlooked the health problems with carbohydrates. So the scientists, I would argue, have not been as helpful as culture.

What is 'culture'? Culture is traditional diets, culture is the advice of our mothers and grandmothers, culture is eating according to traditional cuisines that have all sorts of wisdom about food and health built into them without anyone knowing it.

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It's that example I give of eating tomatoes with olive oil. That was hit upon probably for taste reasons, but it turns out it's a very healthy way to eat tomatoes because the olive oil helps deliver the lycopene to your body; it's a medium in which the lycopene is dissolved.

Science has just figured this out. Culture knew this for a couple hundred years. The authority of this book is not science. The authority of this book is tradition and common sense.

Somebody read it and said, 'That's interesting, this book reminded me of reading Dr. Spock.' Dr. S wrote a book at a time when everybody was trying to professionalize parenting. And there were all these expert theories, and there were new kinds of foods to replace that old-fashioned thing called mother's milk. New, improved formulas that were 'better for your baby.' We were corporatizing and professionalizing child rearing.

Spock came along and said, 'Your mother was right. Don't pay attention to these theories. Trust your instincts. People have been raising kids successfully for thousands of years without expert help.' And the same is true with food.

We're at that place of assuming that the process is better, that there's more sophisticated advice than what your mother gave you or your grandmother or your great-grandmother gave you. Basically, I'm telling people to trust their gut, in a sense, about food, and trust tradition rather than the latest theories. You shouldn't need to read a book to tell you how to eat ... but I'm hoping a few people will buy it.

I don't feel comfortable telling people how to eat. And I don't feel it's science's job either. So I came up with a couple of rules that don't tell you what to eat but kind of how to think about eating.

Beyond telling people to eat food, I'm not saying, 'Eat meat/Don't eat meat' or 'Eat butter/Don't eat butter.' So it's a book that I hope will give people a set of very simple rules to make traveling through the daunting landscape of the supermarket a little less daunting. And to remind people that it's really a pleasure to be at the center of this transaction. It shouldn't be work.

There's pleasure in cooking; there's pleasure in shopping for food. It shouldn't be a chore, and eating shouldn't be a source of anxiety. I'm hoping people will finish the book and feel a little more relaxed about food.

The future of food

I'm very excited by what's going on right now. There are many different kinds of aspects to it. There's the whole movement to improve food in the schools and to get junk food out. There's a movement to stop marketing to kids.

There's the sustainable agriculture movement and developing better ways to farm. You have farmers' markets and the activism around the farm bill. There is a whole set of new players looking at farm policy. There's the issue of getting more access to fruits and vegetables for people in the inner city. It's a very multipronged effort to reform the American way of growing and eating food.

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Not to mention what's going on at the high end with chefs; there's this renaissance of American cuisine right now. I think it's a very exciting time to be working on these issues, and it's only going to get easier to find real food in the market. Sure, you have countertrends, with General Mills doing more and more processed food, but even Wal-Mart is trying to do local and organic food. Parade magazine had a story on local food last week [November 11]. Some of the values we're talking about are being disseminated.

When I started Omnivore, these were very elite issues. When my publicist went to the Today show, they'd say, 'Oh, "organic," "local" — our viewers don't know what that is.' Now they do. And that's only happened in a year or two. So there's something going on, and it's quite profound.

Our way of eating has been disastrous. We have these record levels of cancer, diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and a lot of this is tied to the way we're eating. And that it would be rejected sooner or later makes good sense. Doctors are going to take a greater interest in nutrition. This connection between diet and health is becoming very well established.

It's just not sustainable to eat the way we've been eating. It'll be too expensive; we'll be too sick. And we happen to live in a time when we have alternatives. This would have been the manifesto of a crackpot 20 years ago. To eat the way I am describing, you would've had to go back to the land. You would have had to go off the grid. Because you couldn't go into a supermarket and find very much real food. But now the produce section has gotten bigger, there's much more biodiversity there, there's more fish. We live in a time when we have choices.

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