

# MENU FOR THE FUTURE



Northwest  
Earth Institute  
DISCOVER CHANGE, TOGETHER.

D I S C U S S I O N C O U R S E O N

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# MENU FOR THE FUTURE



Northwest  
Earth Institute  
DISCOVER CHANGE, TOGETHER.

Second Edition

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By



Northwest Earth Institute  
107 SE Washington St., Suite 235  
Portland, OR 97214  
(503) 227-2807  
contact@nwei.org  
www.nwei.org

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Andrew F. Lawrence, Chris Mullins, Betty Shelley, Judit Takács and Pat Wolter.

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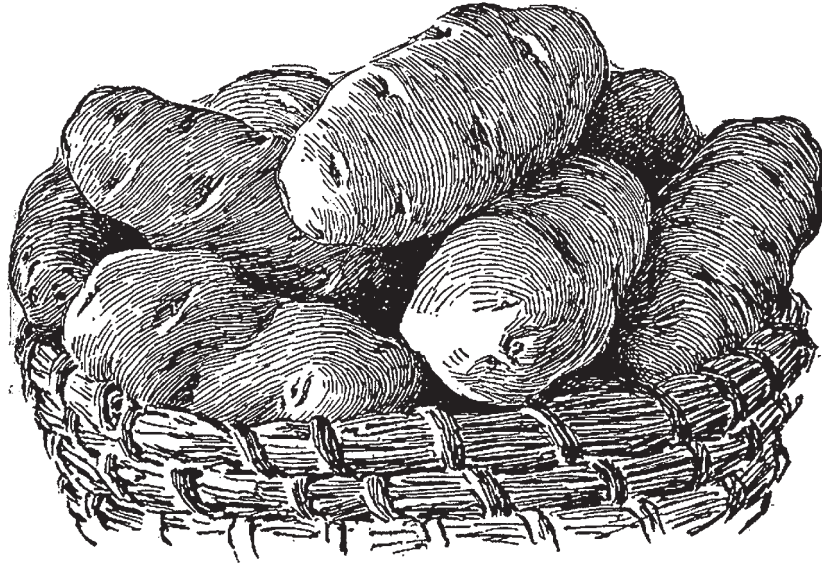
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# INTRODUCTION

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Thank you for participating in the Northwest Earth Institute's discussion course, *Menu for the Future*. NWEI has chosen to offer a course on food because, quite simply, everybody eats. Food connects us intimately with the world around us and provides a concrete entry point into the discussion of many of the ecological concerns we face today. The choices people make every day around what to eat are far reaching and provide a clear and hopeful opportunity for change.

*Menu for the Future* invites course participants to learn more about modern food systems and to reflect upon their own role as eaters in a global food marketplace. The readings consider food from multiple perspectives — cultural, economic, ecological, health and social — each presenting a different, though often complementary, angle on the complex modern food systems most of us depend upon.

The curriculum consists of six sessions, designed for weekly discussion. Each includes readings, accompanying questions, a "Putting It Into Practice" list of suggested actions, and a list of "Further Readings and Resources" (available at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org)). We suggest sharing your goals

for further change with your group during the optional "Celebration and Call to Action" session. This last session is encouraged as a way for your group to celebrate the completion of the course, share goals and progress, and consider ways the group might continue to work together.

Each week as you meet with your discussion group, we invite you to bring your own experience and critical thinking to the process. The readings are intended to invoke meaningful discussion. Whether you agree or disagree, you will have an opportunity to clarify your views and values. Our hope is that you will come away from this course with an increased awareness of how food connects you to place, to others, and to Earth and that you will be inspired to act upon that awareness.

We trust that you will find this experience to be of deep and lasting value. We invite you to connect with us online at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org), or visit our blog at [blog.nwei.org](http://blog.nwei.org), or our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/NorthwestEarthInstitute](http://www.facebook.com/NorthwestEarthInstitute).

To become a member of NWEI and support the sharing of this work with others, please join at [www.nwei.org/join](http://www.nwei.org/join) or complete the membership form on page 117.

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# GUIDELINES

## FOR THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER

For each session of this course, one participant brings an “opening,” a second participant facilitates the discussion, and a third participant takes notes on each person’s commitment to action. The roles rotate each week with a different group member doing the opening and facilitating. This process is at the core of the Earth Institute culture — it assumes we gain our greatest insights through self-discovery, promoting discussion among equals with no teacher.



### FOR THE SESSION FACILITATOR

As facilitator for one session, your role is to stimulate and moderate the discussion. You do not need to be an expert or the most knowledgeable person about the topic.

Your role is to:

- Remind the designated person ahead of time to bring an opening.
- Begin and end on time.
- Ask the questions included in each chapter, or your own.
- Make sure your group has time to talk about their commitments to action — it is a positive way to end each gathering.
- Keep discussion focused on the session’s topic. A delicate balance is best — don’t force the group into the questions, but don’t allow the discussion to drift too far.
- Manage the group process, using the guidelines below:

A primary goal is for everyone to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don’t let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.

Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

The focus should be on personal reactions to the readings — on personal values, feelings, and experiences.

The course is not for judging others’ responses.

#### **Consensus is not a goal.**

The facilitator should ensure that the action item discussion:

- allows each person’s action item to be discussed for 1-2 minutes;

- remains non-judgmental and non-prescriptive;
- focuses on encouraging fellow group members in their commitments and actions.

### FOR THE SESSION OPENER

- Bring a short opening, not more than a couple of minutes. It should be something meaningful to you, or that expresses your personal appreciation for food or the natural world. Examples: a short personal story, an object or photograph that has special meaning, a poem, a visualization, etc. We encourage you to have fun and be creative.
- The purpose of the opening is twofold. First, it provides a transition from other activities of the day into the group discussion. Second, since the opening is personal, it allows the group to get better acquainted with you. This aspect of the course can be very rewarding.

### FOR THE NOTETAKER

At the end of each session, each participant will commit to one action item they will complete before the next meeting. They will share their action with the group, and it is your responsibility as notetaker to record each person’s commitment to action.

Each week the notetaker role will rotate. During the portion of discussion focused on action items, the notetaker from the previous meeting will read aloud each person’s action item, and group members will have the opportunity to share their successes and struggles in implementing their actions. The new notetaker for that week will then record each person’s commitment for the next meeting.

# EVALUATION

**PART 1. PLEASE FILL OUT WEEKLY. Rate the six sessions.**

	POOR CHOICE .....EXCELLENT					COMMENTS:
1. Setting the Table	1	2	3	4	5	
2. A Growing Concern	1	2	3	4	5	
3. Farming for the Future	1	2	3	4	5	
4. You Are What You Eat	1	2	3	4	5	
5. Towards a Just Food System	1	2	3	4	5	
6. Cultivating Change	1	2	3	4	5	

Were the following articles helpful? Circle "Y" if we should use the article next time or "N" if we should look for better reading material. Leave blank if you didn't read it or have no opinion.

	COMMENTS:	
<b>1. Setting the Table</b>		
"A Tale of Two Saturdays" .....	Y	N
"The Anxiety of Eating" .....	Y	N
"When Potatoes Go Electric" .....	Y	N
"Food for Thought" .....	Y	N
"Traditional Foods Remind Us of Who We Are" .....	Y	N
"When There Isn't Enough" .....	Y	N
"Fruits of Desire" .....	Y	N
"The Pleasures of Eating" .....	Y	N
<b>2. A Growing Concern</b>		
"The Folly of Big Agriculture: Why Nature Always Wins" .....	Y	N
"Industrial Food: Myth and Reality" .....	Y	N
"The Price of Life" .....	Y	N
"Industrial Meat and Antibiotic Use" .....	Y	N
"How Happy Was Your Meal?" .....	Y	N
"Overfishing" .....	Y	N
"When Good Food Goes Bad" .....	Y	N
"Farming in the Time of Climate Catastrophe" .....	Y	N
"Can We Restore the Prairie — And Still Support Ourselves?" .....	Y	N
<b>3. Farming for the Future</b>		
"Instead of Trying to Feed the World, Let's Help It Feed Itself" .....	Y	N
"Planet Organic: How Organic Agriculture Can Feed the World" .....	Y	N
"Lawn to Farm" .....	Y	N
"Backyard Permaculture: A 12 Step Program" .....	Y	N



COMMENTS:

- "Up on the Farm" ..... Y N
- "Feeding Themselves and Their Community" ..... Y N
- "Against the Grain of Industrial Agriculture" ..... Y N
- "Hopi Farmers Continue to Utilize Centuries-Old Dry Farming Methods" ..... Y N
- "Growing Local Markets" ..... Y N

4. **You Are What You Eat**

- "Our Culture's Food Crisis through a Relational Lens" ..... Y N
- "Food Labels: Do you Know What's in Your Food?" ..... Y N
- "Detroit's Good Food Cure" ..... Y N
- "Local vs. Organic" ..... Y N
- "Making Informed Food Choices" ..... Y N

5. **Towards a Just Food System**

- "Creating Scarcity from Plenty" ..... Y N
- "Taking Root: Rethinking School Food in New Orleans" ..... Y N
- "Bryant Terry — The Food Justice Activist" ..... Y N
- "The Unpalatable Truth about Quinoa" ..... Y N
- "Care about Your Food? Then Care about Your Farmworkers Too" ..... Y N
- "Breadbasket of Democracy" ..... Y N

6. **Cultivating Change**

- "Slow Eating" ..... Y N
- "Community Kitchens" ..... Y N
- "On Washing Rice" ..... Y N
- Excerpt from "Small Wonder" ..... Y N
- "Dinner on a Dream Ranch" ..... Y N
- "An Invitation — Thinking Like an Ecosystem" ..... Y N

**PART 2. PLEASE COMPLETE AT END OF COURSE.**

Has the course made a difference in your life? Yes No Please describe what actions you are taking or you plan to take in response to this course. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What has been the most valuable aspect of this course? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please list other articles or books that should be included in the course. Identify chapter(s)/page(s) and the session where they should be included. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please send your completed evaluation to NWEI, 107 SE Washington St., Suite 235, Portland, OR 97214. Thank you for your participation!



# SETTING THE TABLE

*Food is our common ground, a universal experience.*

— JAMES BEARD

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## SESSION GOALS

- To get acquainted, to set a schedule for future meetings and to identify volunteers to lead an opening, take notes and facilitate each session.
- To examine the sense of confusion and anxiety often associated with food in North American culture.
- To identify and examine our personal and cultural relationships with food.

Session One helps us reflect on both the pleasures and anxieties of eating in our modern culture. The first few readings capture the confusion, contradictions and anxiety surrounding food in modern America and other industrialized nations. The next few readings explore the power of food to feed us more deeply — to connect us to traditions, a sense of place and each other.



## SUGGESTED GROUP ACTIVITY: EXPLORING FOOD HISTORIES

Ask your parents, grandparents, or friends from another country or culture about their food histories — what did they eat when they were growing up? Did they experience hunger or food insecurity? What did they most look forward to or enjoy about mealtime? Share your findings with your group.

## Circle Question

(Each member answers)

### Share a childhood memory of food.

*Reminder to the facilitator: The circle question should move quickly. Elicit an answer from each participant without questions or comments from others. The facilitator's guidelines are on page 6.*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the idea of a “conscious kitchen” inspire or overwhelm you? In what ways can it be both inspiring and overwhelming at the same time? What might be one step you can take toward a conscious kitchen?
2. Do you ever feel confused, guilty or conflicted when deciding what to buy or eat? Explain.
3. Two authors discuss that it may be just as important to think about how you eat as what you eat. What might you want to change about how you eat, and why?
4. Does social media play a role in your cooking and eating choices? If so, what are the positive and negative aspects of social media's effects on your food life?
5. How is mindful eating as described in “Food for Thought” different from how you consume your average meal? How might eating more mindfully improve your experience of eating?
6. Do you have a family recipe or particular food that has been passed down through the generations? Does this food connect you to your family or family history in a special way?
7. How does a “food tradition” differ from “traditional foods”?

8. Are there any foods that you eat to remind you of who you are? Explain.
9. Wendell Berry says that how we eat determines how the world is used. What does that mean to you? How does your eating affect how the world is used?



#### PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one action to commit to this week, then share your struggles and successes with your group at your next group meeting. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- When you shop, pay attention to what influences your food choices — convenience, freshness, habit, health, advertising, etc.
- How could you eat more mindfully? How could you incorporate mindfulness into one meal this week? Pick one meal and write a paragraph about your experience.
- Be part of a group — family or friends — that meets periodically to eat together.
- Participate in your family or cultural food traditions. For example, put a healthier spin on an old family recipe, learn a recipe from your elders or teach a child a favorite family recipe.

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

Interested in finding out more about the topics presented in this session?  
Please visit [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org) and navigate to our EcoForum.





## A TALE OF TWO SATURDAYS

By Alexandra Zissu

### SATURDAY #1

It's a bittersweet moment when the asparagus, strawberries, and peas fade from the farmers' market and the first-of-season peaches, nectarines, blueberries, and summer squash loudly take their place. It's hard to get too wistful — corn and tomatoes are mere weeks away. Things are looking good, even for next winter, because my tiny neighborhood farmer's market has added some diverse and lovely new vendors who will be here year-round, supplying

cheese, maple syrup, tender salad greens (oh, the sunflower sprouts!) and perfect pastured eggs — even in brutal and unkind February. Other new additions include farmed trout (smoked, too) and Long Island wines. Just a few years ago, I always had to supplement at the supermarket on the way home from this market. No longer. And the place is hopping! People seem, for the most part, to have their own reusable bags! A neighbor and I stop to exchange news of a butcher who come fall will open shop nearby with grass-fed and local offerings. My bags — and heart — full, I head home to add my bounty to my already farm-share-stuffed fridge. I'm elated, hopeful. I can't wait to eat lunch.

### DEFINITIONS

**atavistic:** the reappearance of a characteristic in an organism after several generations of absence, usually caused by the chance recombination of genes

**neophilia:** a tendency to like anything new; a love of novelty

**neophobia:** fear of new things or experiences

**omnivore:** an animal that eats food of both plant and animal origin

**omnivore's dilemma:** Michael Pollan defines the omnivore's dilemma as the age-old question of what we should have for dinner, made more complicated

by our modern industrial and globalized food system

**social media:** forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos

**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture, the federal department that provides leadership on farming, agriculture, forestry and food issues in the United States.

## SATURDAY #2

We're spending the weekend away at the beach — impromptu. Although we often bring some of our food with us when traveling, we haven't this time, and our preschooler is getting cranky-hungry. I walk into a supermarket the size of a football field and easily lose an hour, dazed by choice, reading label after ingredient list after label, and further dazed that despite the monumental amount of offerings, I'm finding few conscious choices at all. People pass me pushing carts piled high with packaged, processed foods, cases of bottled water. I pause before the fish counter and am amazed by the international seafood scene announced by the country-of-origin labels (COOL) — Sri Lanka, China, Chile — even though we're a mile or so from the Atlantic Ocean. I make do and leave. I am depressed and discouraged.



These food highs and lows hit me often. I get all excited about the wonderful advances that are being made in the eco-food arena, and about how large the movement seems to be growing — the Obamas have an organic garden on the South Lawn! What could be huger than that? — only to be slapped back to reality. Ecologically farmed and raised food isn't widely available; the movement is too small, and often misunderstood. But it desperately needs to grow bigger — for human health and the health of the planet. The conventional food supply that most Americans have easiest access to on a daily basis — in supermarkets, cafeterias,



fast food restaurants, and takeout spots — is largely unregulated, woefully contaminated, and generally not good for us, the farmers that raise it, or the earth. There should be nothing wrong with that chicken and water — both are ostensibly healthy choices — but for many reasons, there is. We need an education to know what's going on with our food. Not enough of us know that our salad greens and chickens are being dunked in chlorine baths to disinfect them, that bottled water is actually overpriced tap water shipped around the country in questionable plastic containers that taint their contents and overwhelm our landfills, that dinner might contain genetically modified food, that vegetables have been sprayed with probable carcinogens and possibly even chemical pesticides currently banned in the United States but still used in countries we import from, or that animals and seafood (some of them natural vegetarians) are fed animal by-products, waste, or even arsenic, which sicken them and us. The average consumer, I've been told, doesn't even know that the term "USDA" organic actually is a government-regulated standard and must be third-party certified, while the term "natural" on any food packaging doesn't mean a thing. It implies plenty, but there's nothing in place to prove or uphold the implication (though in 2009 the USDA began the process of defining it for meat and poultry only). Basically, the use of the word "natural" is pure marketing.

This sort of education is hard to swallow, and it's also hard to come by. If we all collectively knew more about those shrink-wrapped chickens, we would vote very differently with our dollars. Even at my most discouraged, I believe this to be true. I'm not distracted by other people's supermarket grocery carts because I'm judging what they're buying. On the contrary. I'm trying to figure out how we all came to a point where we're willingly ingesting things we know so little about, and that are so incredibly harmful to our bodies and our earth. I'm distracted trying to figure out how to educate people in the most compelling and least off-putting way.

Because here's the thing: Our everyday food choices have the capacity to change the world. Demand influences supply. So it makes sense to choose wisely, consciously. The factory farming of cattle (and other animals) is an energy-intensive, inhumane, earth-polluting, greenhouse gas-releasing endeavor. Once you learn that, how hard is it to replace that burger with a smaller one that came from a well-treated grass-fed animal? Not very. "Buying grass-fed beef is the greatest thing we can do for the planet and it makes up for other things," says Alice Waters, chef, food activist, and godmother of all things local and organic. "Buying a hybrid car is nothing compared to eating grass-fed beef and not eating very much of it." If more people heard this sort of information, they'd be more inclined to shop smarter.

But, alas, most eaters don't know enough about the

horrors of conventionally raised food to want to make the switch. Or they don't want to think about it. Or maybe they do want to think about it, and care deeply about it, and even have dog-eared copies of Michael Pollan's very dog-ear-able recent books on the subject (*Omnivore's Dilemma*, *In Defense of Food*), but still cannot figure out how — or where — to find the better versions of what is currently in their fridge. Who really has time to read sliced-bread ingredients for fifteen minutes at the supermarket on a vacation weekend, let alone during a weekly grocery run?

### A FEW CRUCIAL THOUGHTS:

- Conscious food is for everyone. It is not holier-than-anything, judgmental, or elitist. In fact, it's common sense to want to purchase, support, and eat food that is healthiest for all involved. If anything, it's neighborly.
- Conscious food can be affordable food. *It can actually save you money.*
- Embrace your kitchen. You don't need fancy cooking skills, but you do have to be able to turn your thoughtfully sourced ingredients into meals. Also, you need to know how to substitute in-season ingredients in any recipe that calls for out-of-season items, or for items that don't grow at the same time in the same climate.
- Maintaining a conscious kitchen goes beyond food. It involves employing energy-efficient appliances, using cookware and cleaning products that don't contain carcinogens, having food storage containers that won't leach chemicals into your leftovers, and taking waste into careful consideration.
- Every little bit helps. No matter how far you take this personal journey, some is better than none.
- Conscious food is better-tasting food. Nothing beats the flavor of first-of-the-season sweet peas, crispy kirby cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes off the vine.

Keep those cherry tomatoes in mind as you rejigger how you approach, gather, cook, store, and dispose of your food. The goal of knowing how to wade through the gray areas of food shopping, or choosing a safe pan, or learning about the ins and outs of genetic modification, is ultimately the shock and delight of eating something that tastes exactly as it should. They're inextricably linked. A healthful, flavorful, local tomato and all that it stands for is well worth seeking out and defending — for you, for the person who grew it, and for the ground it was pulled from — for many years to come.

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Alexandra Zissu is an eco lifestyle expert, writer, speaker, and consultant. She's the author of *The Conscious Kitchen* (2010) — a Books for a Better Life Awards finalist — and co-author of *Planet Home* (2010), *The Complete Organic Pregnancy* (2006), and *The Butcher's Guide to Well-Raised Meat* (2011). This article is an excerpt from *The Conscious Kitchen*.



## THE ANXIETY OF EATING

By Michael Pollan

America has never had a stable national cuisine; each immigrant population has brought its own foodways to the American table, but none has been powerful enough to hold the national diet very steady. We seem bent on reinvigorating the American way of eating every generation, in great proxysms of neophilia and neophobia. That might explain why Americans have been such easy marks for food fads and diets of every description.

This is the country, after all, where at the turn of the last century Dr. John Harvey Kellogg persuaded great numbers of the nation's most affluent and best-educated to pay good money to sign themselves into his legendary nutty sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, where they submitted to a regime that included all grape diets and almost hourly enemas. Around the same time millions of Americans succumbed to the vogue for "Fletcherizing" — chewing each bite of food as many as a hundred times — introduced by Horace Fletcher, also known as the "Great Masticator."

This period marked the first golden age of American food faddism, though of course its exponents spoke not in terms of fashion but of "scientific eating" as much as we do now.



It's easy, especially for Americans, to forget just how novel this nutritional orthodoxy is, or that there are still cultures that have been eating more or less the same way for generations, relying on such archaic criteria as taste and tradition to guide them in their food selection. We Americans are amazed to learn that some of the cultures that set their culinary course by the lights of habit and pleasure, rather than nutritional science and marketing, are actually healthier than we are — that is, suffer a lower incidence of diet-related health troubles.

The "French paradox" is the most famous such case, though as Paul Rozin points out, the French don't regard

the matter as paradoxical at all. We Americans resort to that term because the French experience — a population of wine-swilling cheese-eaters with low rates of heart disease and obesity — confounds our orthodoxy about food. That orthodoxy regards certain tasty foods as poisons (carbs now, fats then), failing to appreciate how we eat and even how we feel about eating, may in the end be just as important as what we eat. The French eat all sorts of supposedly unhealthy foods, but they do it according to a strict and stable set of rules: they eat small portions and don't go back for seconds; they don't snack; they seldom eat alone; and communal meals are long leisurely affairs. In other words, the French culture of food successfully negotiates the omnivore's dilemma, allowing the French to enjoy their meals without ruining their health.

Perhaps because we have no such culture of food in America, almost every question about eating is up for grabs.

Fats or carbs? Three squares or continuous grazing? Raw or cooked? Organic or industrial? Vegetarian or vegan? Meat or mock meat? Foods of astounding novelty fill the shelves of our supermarkets, and the line between a food and a "nutritional supplement" has fogged to the point where people make meals of protein bars and shakes. Is it any wonder Americans suffer from so many eating disorders? In the absence of any lasting consensus about what and how and where and when to eat, the omnivore's dilemma has returned to America with an almost atavistic force.

This situation suits the food industry just fine of course. The more anxious we are about eating, the more vulnerable we are to the seductions of the marketer and the expert's advice. Food marketing in particular thrives on dietary instability and so tends to exacerbate it. Since it's difficult to sell more food to such a well-fed population (though not, as we're discovering, impossible), food companies put their

## WHEN POTATOES GO ELECTRIC

By Andrew F. Lawrence

To be honest, my mother was never really that great of a cook. But like most people who grew up before the proliferation of TV dinners, she knew how to make a couple of really great meals. One of her dishes, and a favorite of mine growing up, was mashed potatoes. Warm, fluffy, garlicky, all of the tastiest adjectives mixed in glorious warm spud form.

One day, long after I was no longer regularly eating my mother's cooking, I had one of those exceptionally strong cravings for mashed potatoes. Plagued with a moment of remaining childish arrogance, I thought I could figure out how mom made her potatoes. I started to ponder the plethora of possibilities. How much butter did she put in, I wondered. Probably too much. How much do most people put in, for that matter? It was in this moment of contemplation that I realized I was faced with a choice which, in retrospect, was rather strange.

I could just ask a computer. Or, more precisely put, I could ask the collective wisdom of the great and powerful internet cooking community. Maybe my mom's mashed potatoes weren't the best out there. Maybe there was a universality to the technique. I could just call my mom, of course, but she only knew how to make her mashed potatoes. The internet, however, could immediately offer me thousands of variations, some probably even from top chefs.

It's a very new choice to have, and I'm not the only one who's found himself in this dilemma. According to a recent survey by the Hartman Group:

- 40 percent of survey participants reported that they now learn about food via food websites, blogs and apps
- 50 percent are getting their food information fix from social networking sites

While some may look at these figures and feel nostalgic for a different time, others may be relishing in the fact that they now have access to the collective wisdom of thousands, perhaps millions, of foodies and their moms. The information exchange of food ideas, however, is usually not the only trade happening. Companies are finding out that with the proliferation of recipes so too comes an opportunity for greater brand recognition, free marketing by social media sharing, and brand loyalty to be passed on within families. The ways in which we share information have profoundly changed, and for better or for worse, so has the motivation for why we share it.

While I admit I did peer into the bottomless pit of recipes the great well of digital knowledge had to offer, I eventually called my mom. Somehow Bobby Flay's mashed potatoes could never taste quite like hers.

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Andrew F. Lawrence is a full time word enthusiast and passionate educator working on his M.A. in adult education at Portland State University. Andrew is a runner, foodie, and practicing polyglot.

Consulted sources: <http://www.foodproductdesign.com/news/2012/02/social-media-changing-america-s-food-culture.aspx>



efforts into grabbing market share by introducing new kinds of highly processed foods, which have the virtue of being both highly profitable and infinitely adaptable. Sold under the banner of “convenience,” these processed foods are frequently designed to create whole new eating occasions, such as in the bus on the way to school (the protein bar or Pop-Tart) or in the car on the way to work (Campbell’s... one-handed, microwaveable, microchunked soup in a container designed to fit a car’s cup holder).

The success of food marketers in exploiting shifting eating patterns and nutritional fashions has a steep cost. Getting us to change how we eat over and over again tends to undermine the various social structures that surround and steady our eating, institutions like the family dinner, for example, or taboos on snacking in between meals and eating alone. In their relentless pursuit of new markets, food companies (with some crucial help from the microwave oven, which made “cooking” something even small children could do) have broken Mom’s hold over the American menu by marketing to every conceivable demographic — and especially to children.

A vice-president of marketing at General Mills once painted for me a picture of the state of the American family dinner, courtesy of video cameras that the company’s consulting anthropologists paid families to let them install in the ceilings above the kitchen and dining room tables: Mom, perhaps feeling sentimental about the dinners of her childhood, still prepares a dish and a salad that she usually ends up eating by herself. Meanwhile, the kids, and Dad, too, if he’s around, each fix something different for themselves, because Dad’s on a low-carb diet, the teenager’s become a vegetarian, and the eight-year-old is on a strict ration of pizza that the shrink says it’s best to indulge (lest she

develop an eating disorder later in life). So over the course of a half-hour or so, each family member roams into the kitchen, removes a single portion entrée from the freezer, and zaps it in the microwave. (Many of these entrees have been helpfully designed to be safely “cooked” by an eight-year-old.) After the sound of the beep, each diner brings his or her microwaveable dish to the dining room table, where he or she may or may not cross paths with another family member for a few minutes. Families who eat this way are among 47 percent of Americans who report to pollsters that they still sit down to a family meal every night.

Several years ago, in a book called *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, sociologist Daniel Bell called attention to the tendency of capitalism, in its single-minded pursuit of profit, to erode the various cultural underpinnings that steady a society but impede the march of commercialization. The family dinner, and more generally cultural consensus on the subject of eating, appears to be the latest such casualty of capitalism. The rules and rituals stood in the way of the food industry’s need to sell a well-fed population more food, through ingenious new ways of processing, packaging, and marketing it. Whether a stronger set of traditions would have stood up better to this relentless economic imperative is hard to say; today Americans’ fast food habits are increasingly gaining traction even in places like France.

So we find ourselves as a species almost back where we started: anxious omnivores struggling once again to figure out what’s wise to eat. Instead of relying on the accumulated wisdom of a cuisine, or even the wisdom of our senses, we rely on expert opinion, advertising, government food pyramids, and diet books, and we place our faith in science to sort out for us what culture once did, with rather more success. Such has been the genius of capitalism, to re-create something akin to a state of nature in the modern supermarket or fast-food outlet, throwing us back on a perplexing, nutritionally perilous landscape deeply shadowed by the omnivore’s dilemma.

This reading is excerpted from *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006). Michael Pollan is a contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine* and is a Knight Professor of Journalism at UC Berkeley. His newest book is *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*.



If you’d like to learn more about how technology affects our lives, check out NWEI’s *Voluntary Simplicity* discussion course at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).





## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By Jeff Gordinier

Try this: place a forkful of food in your mouth. It doesn't matter what the food is, but make it something you love—let's say it's that first nibble from three hot, fragrant, perfectly cooked ravioli.

Now comes the hard part. Put the fork down. This could be a lot more challenging than you imagine, because that first bite was very good and another immediately beckons. You're hungry.

Today's experiment in eating, however, involves becoming aware of that reflexive urge to plow through your meal like Cookie Monster on a shortbread bender. Resist it. Leave the fork on the table. Chew slowly. Stop talking. Tune in to the texture of the pasta, the flavor of the cheese, the bright color of the sauce in the bowl, the aroma of the rising steam.

Continue this way throughout the course of a meal, and you'll experience the third-eye-opening pleasures and frustrations of a practice known as mindful eating.

The concept has roots in Buddhist teachings. Just as there are forms of meditation that involve sitting, breathing, standing and walking, many Buddhist teachers encourage their students to meditate with food, expanding

**Eat with others.** Cook for your family, go to lunch with a friend instead of eating at your desk, or host a potluck — eating with others can facilitate bonding experiences and increase enjoyment of and appreciation for the food you share.

tips...

consciousness by paying close attention to the sensation and purpose of each morsel. In one common exercise, a student is given three raisins, or a tangerine, to spend 10 or 20 minutes gazing at, musing on, holding and patiently masticating.

Lately, though, such experiments of the mouth and mind have begun to seep into a secular arena, from the Harvard School of Public Health to the California campus of Google. In the eyes of some experts, what seems like the simplest of acts—eating slowly and genuinely relishing each bite—could be the remedy for a fastpaced Paula Deen Nation in which an endless parade of new diets never seems to slow a stampede toward obesity.

Mindful eating is not a diet, or about giving up anything at all. It's about experiencing food more intensely—especially the pleasure of it. You can eat a cheeseburger mindfully, if you wish. You might enjoy it a lot more. Or you might decide, halfway through, that your body has had enough. Or that it really needs some salad. "This is anti-diet," said Dr. Jan Chozen Bays, a pediatrician and meditation teacher in Oregon and the author of *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. "I think the fundamental problem is that we go unconscious when we eat."

The last few years have brought a spate of books, blogs and videos about hyper-conscious eating. A Harvard nutritionist, Dr. Lilian Cheung, has devoted herself to studying its benefits, and is passionately encouraging corporations and health care providers to try it.

At the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University, Prof. Brian Wansink, the author of "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think," has conducted scores of experiments on the psychological factors that lead to our bottomless bingeing. A mindful lunch hour recently became part of the schedule at Google, and self-help gurus like Oprah Winfrey and Kathy Freston have become cheerleaders for the practice.

With the annual chow-downs of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Super Bowl Sunday behind us, and Lent coming, it's worth pondering whether mindful eating is something that the mainstream ought to be, well, more mindful of. Could a discipline pioneered by Buddhist monks and nuns help teach us how to get healthy, relieve stress and shed many of the neuroses that we've come to associate with food?

Dr. Cheung is convinced that it can. Last week, she met with team members at Harvard Pilgrim Health Care and asked them to spend quality time with a chocolate-covered almond.

"The rhythm of life is becoming faster and faster, so we really don't have the same awareness and the same ability to check into ourselves," said Dr. Cheung, who, with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, co-wrote *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*. "That's why mindful

eating is becoming more important. We need to be coming back to ourselves and saying: ‘Does my body need this? Why am I eating this? Is it just because I’m so sad and stressed out?’”

The topic has even found its way into culinary circles that tend to be more focused on Rabelaisian excess than monastic restraint. In January, Dr. Michael Finkelstein, a holistic physician who oversees SunRaven, a holistic-living center in Bedford, N.Y, gave a talk about mindful gardening and eating at the smorgasbord-friendly headquarters of the James Beard Foundation in New York City.

“The question isn’t what are the foods to eat, in my mind,” he said in an interview. “Most people have a general sense of what the healthy foods are, but they’re not eating them. What’s on your mind when you’re eating: that’s mindful eating to me.”

A good place to try it is the Blue Cliff Monastery, in Pine Bush, N.Y, a Hudson Valley hamlet. At the serene refuge about 75 miles northwest of Manhattan, curious lay people can join Buddhist brothers and sisters for a free “day of mindfulness” twice a week.

At a gathering in January, visitors watched a videotaped lecture by Thich Nhat Hanh (pronounced tik-nyot-HAHN), who founded this and other monasteries around the world; they strolled methodically around the grounds as part of a walking meditation, then filed into a dining room for lunch.

No one spoke, in keeping with a key principle of mindful eating. The point is simply to eat, as opposed to eating and talking, eating and watching TV, or eating and watching TV and gossiping on the phone while Tweeting and updating

one’s Facebook status.

A long buffet table of food awaited, all of it vegan and mindfully prepared by two monks in the kitchen. There was plenty of rice, herbed chickpeas, a soup made with cubes of taro, a stew of fried tofu in tomato sauce.

In silence, people piled their plates with food, added a squirt or two of condiments (eating mindfully doesn’t mean forsaking the hot sauce) and sat down together with eyes closed during a Buddhist prayer for gratitude and moderation.

What followed was captivating and mysterious. Surrounded by a murmur of clinking forks, spoons and chopsticks, the Blue Cliff congregation, or sangha, spend the lunch hour contemplating the enjoyment of spice, crunch, saltiness, warmth, tenderness and like-minded company.

Some were thinking, too, about the origins of the food: thousands of farmers, truck drivers and laborers whose work had brought it here.

As their jaws moved slowly, their faces took on expressions of deep focus. Every now and then came a pause within the pause: A chime would sound, and, according to the monastery’s custom, all would stop moving and chewing in order to breathe and explore an even deeper level of sensory awareness.

It looked peaceful, but inside some of those heads, a struggle was afoot.

“It’s much more challenging than we would imagine,” said Carolyn Cronin, 64, who lives near the monastery and regularly attends the mindfulness days. “People are used to eating so fast. This is a practice of stopping, and we don’t realize how much we’re not stopping.”

For many people, eating fast means eating more. Mindful eating is meant to nudge us beyond what we’re craving so that we wake up to why we’re craving it and what factors might be stoking the habit of belly-stuffing.

“As we practice this regularly, we become aware that we don’t need to eat as much,” said Phap Khoi, 43, a robed monk who has been stationed at Blue Cliff since it opened in 2007. “Whereas when people just gulp down food, they can eat a lot and not feel full.”

It’s this byproduct of mindful eating — its potential as a psychological barrier to overeating — that has generated excitement among nutritionists like Dr. Cheung.

“Thich Nhat Hanh often talks about our craving being like a crying baby who is trying to draw our attention,” she said. “When the baby cries, the mother cradles the baby to try to calm the baby right away. By acknowledging and embracing our cravings through a few breaths, we can stop our autopilot of reaching out to the pint of ice cream or the bag of chips.”

The average American doesn’t have the luxury of ruminating on the intense tang of sriracha sauce at a



monastery. “Most of us are not going to be Buddhist monks,” said Dr. Finkelstein, the holistic physician. “What I’ve learned is that it has to work at home.” To that end, he and others suggest that people start with a few baby steps. “Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Dr. Cheung said.

“You’re not supposed to be able to switch on your mindfulness button and be able to do it 100 percent. It’s a practice you keep working toward.”

Dr. Bays, the pediatrician, has recommendations that can sound like a return to the simple rhythms of Mayberry, if not “Little House on the Prairie.” If it’s impossible to eat mindfully every day, consider planning one special repast a week. Click off the TV. Sit at the table with loved ones.

“How about the first five minutes we eat, we just eat in silence and really enjoy our food?” she said. “It happens step by step.”

Sometimes, even she is too busy to contemplate a chickpea. So there are days when Dr. Bays will take three mindful sips of tea, “and then, O.K., I’ve got to go do my work,” she said. “Anybody can do that. Anywhere.”

Even scarfing down a burrito in the car offers an opportunity for insight. “Mindful eating includes mindless eating,” she said. “I am aware that I am eating and driving.”

Few places in America are as frantically abuzz with activity as the Google headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., but when Thich Nhat Hanh dropped by for a day of mindfulness in September, hundreds of employees showed up.

Part of the event was devoted to eating thoughtfully in silence, and the practice was so well received that an hour-long wordless vegan lunch is now a monthly observance on the Google campus.

“Interestingly enough, a lot of the participants are the engineers, which pleases us very much,” said Olivia Wu, an executive chef at the company. “I think it quiets the mind. I think there is a real sense of feeling restored so that they can go back to the crazy pace that they came from.”

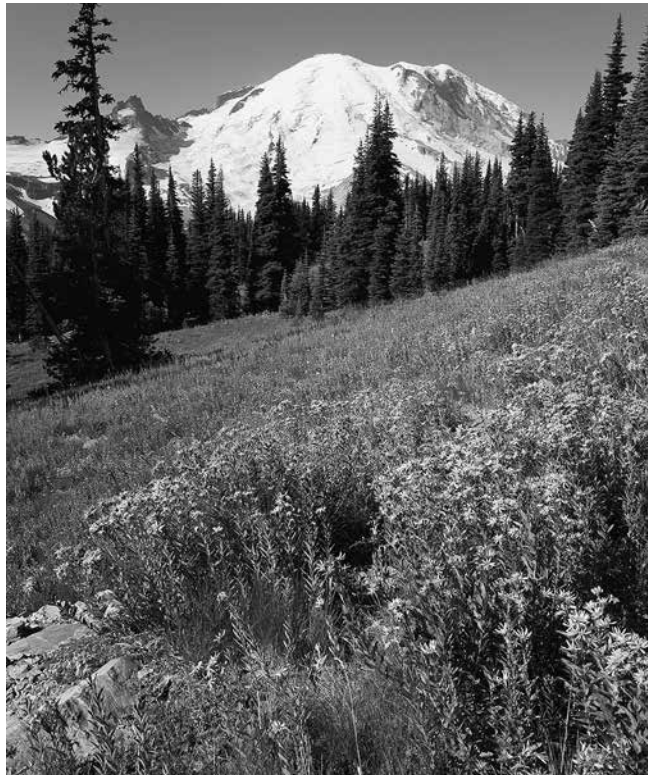
It’s not often, after all, that those workhorse technicians get to stop and smell the pesto. “Somebody will say, ‘I ate so much less,’” Ms. Wu said. “And someone else will say, ‘You know, I never noticed how spicy arugula tastes.’”

And that could be the ingredient that helps mindful eating gain traction in mainstream American culture: flavor.

“So many people now have found themselves in an adversarial relationship with food, which is very tragic,” Dr. Bays said. “Eating should be a pleasurable activity.”

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Bringing a cultural critic’s sensibility to his food writing, Jeff Gordinier writes often for the *New York Times Dining* section. He has also published essays and interviews in *Esquire*, *Details*, *GQ*, *Elle*, *Spin*, and *Outside*, and authored *X Saves the World*, a manifesto for the slacker generation. This piece was originally published in the *New York Times*.



## TRADITIONAL FOODS HELP REMIND US WHO WE ARE

By Kim Eckart

*Tribes are pursuing a hands-on approach to finding and preparing Native foods that give spiritual sustenance, too.*

On a clear Puget Sound day, Mount Rainier loomed large, its 14,000-foot snow-capped peak a striking backdrop to the lands that the Muckleshoot Tribe call home. The tribe has long maintained huckleberry meadows on the mountain’s north flank; other tribes have meadows around the Pacific Northwest, and each tribe believes that its berries are the best.

That day, Valerie Segrest was berry-picking — a part of maintaining the meadows — with her fellow Muckleshoot tribal members, sampling in search of the sweetest patch. She stared at Mount Rainier, experiencing an it-looks-so-good-I-could-eat-it moment: She realized, “I was tasting the mountain, in a way.”

That epiphany helped inspire Segrest to work with Northwest tribes to promote the importance of local foods and cultural practices. As a nutritionist with the Northwest Indian College’s Cooperative Extension and a coordinator of the Muckleshoot Tribe’s Food Sovereignty Project, Segrest emphasizes a hands-on approach to finding and preparing Native foods, and a belief that such methods bring not only physical but also spiritual sustenance.

“Native foods have been in this region for thousands of years,” said Segrest. “That’s what people are craving — more than carbohydrates and protein. They want a connection with food, with the environment, with community. These foods help us remember who we are.”

Segrest grew up visiting her mother’s family farm near Bellingham, Wash., where her aunties swore by the health benefits of berries and helped her forage for wild greens. While pursuing her nutrition degree, Segrest studied Northwest Native foods and their legacy. She and a colleague at the Northwest Indian College developed the “Traditional Foods Principles” — tips to guide eating anywhere, for anyone. Among them: “Traditional foods are whole foods” and “Food is at the center of culture.”

That means encouraging people to eat seasonally — nettles in spring, for instance, and berries in summer — and to make the effort to gather food in the wild. The Muckleshoot reservation lies about 30 miles from Vashon Island where tribal members harvest clams. For many in the tribe, this requires a day off work and more time preserving the clams. Some are dried in the traditional way. “They were strung on necklaces — a sort of candy necklace, only clams. I love that image,” Segrest said. The rest of the harvest is kippered or frozen. It’s just the sort of holistic, culturally viable practice that Segrest is devoted to maintaining.

So is simply incorporating more produce into one’s diet. The elders at the Muckleshoot Senior Center appreciate the fruits and vegetables added to the daily meal — a change Segrest instigated. More people have started coming, and diners’ blood-sugar levels and weight have improved, said Wendy Burdette, the center’s program manager. Segrest’s weekend cooking “camps” also help elders prepare more traditional foods such as elk, fish eggs, and deer. “The community cooks have had time to learn from one another and give back to the community,” Burdette said.

But what if your harvesting ground is the local grocery store?

“I tell people to look for a whole food,” said Segrest. “Things in a box are pretty mysterious to me, so I walk them through the process of identifying whole foods and defining what’s healthy for them.”

Segrest’s classes on finding, preparing, and storing Native foods fill up fast. But it’s the connection to the past, and the sense of community in the present, that she is most proud of.

“I often say that I don’t think I’m really teaching anything. I’m helping people remember what they already know,” she said. “Put a traditional food on a plate, and people start to remember.”

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Kim Eckart wrote this article for *It’s Your Body*, the Fall 2012 issue of *YES! Magazine*. Kim is a Seattle-area elementary school teacher and former *YES!* editor.

## WHEN THERE ISN’T ENOUGH: GROWING UP HUNGRY, LIVING OFF THE LAND

By Jackleen de La Harpe

As a girl, I was as thin as a walking stick. My nickname, Double O, was short for Olive Oyl, Popeye’s scrawny girlfriend with broomstick legs. All of us — my three sisters, one brother, even my mother pregnant with her sixth and final child — were thin. Our family, as poor as you can get and still have a roof over our heads, lived with hunger as a certainty.

Growing up in the rural Pacific Northwest in the 1960s, I don’t ever remember hearing the terms that are used today, such as “foraging,” “gleaning,” or “subsistence,” even though it was how we sometimes survived. There was hunting for deer or bear; fishing for salmon and trout; picking wild blackberries, huckleberries, salmonberries and black caps; digging for clams, pulling up crab pots, hunting for mushrooms. This subsistence life was not optional.

Our family had one piece of good luck — we owned a run-down farmhouse on ten acres of land in Washington State and a single Jersey-Guernsey cow, a prodigious milk producer. A common topic of discussion at the dinner table was the cow. If her udder was infected, could we still drink the milk? If we couldn’t afford to feed her enough, would she



go dry? We had no money to call the vet. I worried about the cow, but mostly I was afraid for myself. I was hungry.

Breakfast before school was a bowl of hot cereal — oatmeal, farina, or cornmeal — sometimes with sugar, often without. I took my lunch to school in a humiliating plastic bread sack or, worse, a giant paper grocery bag, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow — a peanut butter, jam and white bread sandwich, and sometimes an apple from the abandoned orchard on our land.

As a girl, I listened closely to conversations about payday or temporary work at the sawmill, a dangerous place where accidents often meant opportunity for my stepfather. I worried whether our car would break down on the way home or if we could afford food for Katy, our collie.

“The snow line is dropping early this year,” I heard my mother say, and as a six-year-old, I knew what she meant. It would be colder sooner, and we didn’t have money for heating oil. “Maybe you could get a deer,” she urged my stepfather, even if it meant hunting without a license. A deer could save us, I knew.

The ideas of subsistence are hard to grasp in an affluent country like ours. Even I, now a middle-aged, middle-class woman, can hardly imagine my own life as a girl when a second helping at the dinner table was my fervent hope. Or, if my mother’s life had been mine, how I would have raised six children in poverty.

I appreciate the heightened awareness that food writers bring to us, the avalanche of recipes that are published every day, and the progressive grocery store and markets [in my hometown]. The great respect and growing reverence for food describes the culture we live in. This, I think, is the way it should be.

But for some people, or many people without jobs or resources, subsistence defines daily life. It is not a leisurely Sunday digging for Oregon truffles, as I was lucky to do this spring. Even though it was many years ago, I am still besotted with food. Meals, to me, are daily opportunities for happiness. And, for as long as I live, food will remain a firewall blocking a distant worry of going without.

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Jackleen de La Harpe is a fiction and nonfiction writer. Her recent stories use food to explore complex social issues including climate change, tribal sovereignty, and the Bakken oil boom. She originally wrote this piece for the Winter 2013 edition of *Edible Portland*.



## FRUITS OF DESIRE

By Mike Madison

Each summer, I grow six or eight varieties of melon to sell at the farmers’ market in Davis, California, outside Sacramento. Over the years, I’ve grown about 60 different kinds, trying to discover which ones will thrive in the growing conditions I have to work with.

One year I grew a small, smooth-skinned, golden melon from the Crimea, in southern Ukraine. I found these melons to be disappointing, but I brought them to the market anyway. A portly older customer spied them on my table and asked me where they were grown. “I grow them a few miles west of here,” I said, but the seeds came from the Ukraine.”

“I’m from the Ukraine,” he said. “They look just like the melons from home. Let me take a few.”

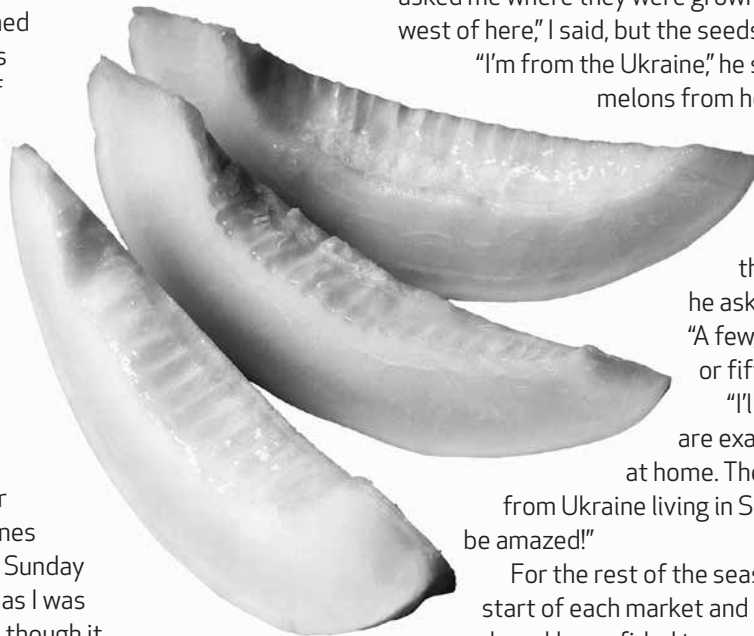
The following week, the man was at the market an hour before it opened. “Do you have those golden melons?” he asked.

“A few,” I said. “Maybe forty or fifty.”

“I’ll take them all. They are exactly the melon we have at home. There are many people from Ukraine living in Sacramento. They will be amazed!”

For the rest of the season, he was there at the start of each market and bought all the little golden melons. He confided to me, in a low voice, “Everyone is crazy to know where I get these, but I won’t tell them. Only you and I know.” He winked at me, and I wondered whether this guy was now in the melon-selling business himself.

Some customers stand before the display of melons almost in a trance, with dreamy looks in their eyes and smiles on their faces as they caress and fondle the melons, perhaps holding one against their cheek. And why not? All fruit evolved largely with the goal of being so attractive that



you would want to put it into your mouth. The buxom shapes, the sensuous surfaces, the alluring fragrances, the promise of sweetness — these are the classic tools of seduction. The melon knows exactly what it's doing.

And yet, there are many customers who handle the melons unkindly, squeezing and poking them, frowning, searching for imaginary flaws, suspicious that the farmer is trying to cheat them, digging around in the crate to see if there is a better one underneath. It is the old Puritan heritage: a distrust of pleasure. As a fonder and caresser of fruit, I am mystified by the pinchers and pokers — such unhappiness they choose for themselves.

A woman in her late fifties, with helmet hair and a Midwestern accent, comes to my stand and pinches and pokes the melons, frowning. She says, "I'm looking for a classic, old-fashioned cantaloupe. No one seems to grow it here."

"Describe it for me," I say.

"It's about this big" — she holds her hands several inches apart — "and has sort of salmon orange flesh, very firm."

"I think I know what you're looking for. Talk to Eric down there on the right." The melons that I grow are sweet, sloppy, juicy, aromatic, perishable, best eaten at the temperature of an August night, standing over a bathtub. What she's after is a melon that would be described in the wholesale seed catalogues as a shipping and storage melon. It is harvested much too green and stored at much too cold a temperature and then shipped to a city thousands of miles away, where it will be served at the breakfast buffet of an airport hotel. All in all, a miserable excuse for a melon. And yet, this is probably what she has known all her life, and people search for what they are accustomed to. When it comes to judging food, lifelong familiarity is worth three or four points on a ten-point scale.

A couple approach. The husband, a fonder and caresser, picks up a smooth, yellow-skinned Charentais melon, inhales its fragrance. "These smell fantastic," he says. He turns to his wife. "Let's get a couple of them."

The wife pinches the clasp of her purse with both hands.

"No," she says, "we couldn't eat that much. Remember, we'll be away on Saturday."

I'm thinking to myself, the two of you couldn't eat a pair of these little melons in three days? I eat one by myself in about three minutes, standing in a muddy field with my pocketknife in my hand, cutting off slices and tossing the chewed rinds in every direction. And 20 minutes later I eat another one.

Mohammed, a Pakistani immigrant who drives an ice cream truck that plays, "Maple Leaf Rag" so relentlessly that by now the tune must have penetrated to his very DNA, buys 10, 12, 14 melons every week, sometimes 20. "Do you eat all those yourself?" I ask. He nods happily. I charge only a dollar each for melons, but I give Mohammed a break on the price; I know that he earns even less than I do.

Most years I grow a row of a melon from Afghanistan called a kharbouza. It's a big melon, 10 or 12 pounds, and problematic to grow. The flesh is green, crisp, refreshing, not overly sweet. I bring a few to the market but keep them in my truck. People have to ask for them. Over time, immigrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and even far-western China have learned that I have these rare melons, hidden.

One evening at the market a young Afghani student comes to my stand. "I bought a kharbouza melon from you last week," he says.

"Yes, I remember," I say. "How was it?"

"I took it home to Fremont for my grandfather. Every summer he gets together with a bunch of other old Afghani men and they recite the Koran, the whole thing. It takes three days. It was the third day, and they had just reached the very last words when I walked in and said, 'Grandfather, I've brought you a kharbouza melon.' All the old men jumped up and shouted, 'It's a miracle! God has heard us!' And then they cut the melon and shared it among themselves, and they sat on the floor reminiscing about home."

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This piece originally appeared in *Saveur* and was featured in *Best Food Writing 2011*. Mike Madison is a California fruit and flower farmer and author of the 2006 memoir *Blithe Tomato*.

*After a good dinner,  
one can forgive anybody,  
even one's relatives.*

— OSCAR WILDE



## THE PLEASURES OF EATING

By Wendell Berry

Many times, after I have finished a lecture on the decline of American farming and rural life, someone in the audience has asked, "What can city people do?"

"Eat responsibly," I have usually answered. Of course, I have tried to explain what I meant by that, but afterwards I have invariably felt that there was more to be said than I had been able to say. Now I would like to attempt a better explanation.

I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as "consumers." If they think beyond that, they recognize that they are passive consumers. They buy what they want — or what they have been persuaded to want — within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are charged. And they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and the cost of what they are sold: How fresh is it? How pure or clean is it? How free of dangerous chemicals? How far was it transported, and what did transportation add to the cost? How much did manufacturing or packaging or advertising add to the cost? When the food product has been manufactured or "processed" or "precooked," how has that affected its quality or price or nutritional value?

Most urban shoppers would tell you that food is produced on farms. But most of them do not know what farms, or what kinds of farms, or where the farms are, or what knowledge or skills are involved in farming. They apparently have little doubt that farms will continue to produce, but they do not know how or over what obstacles. For them, then, food is pretty much an abstract idea — something they do not know or imagine — until it appears

on the grocery shelf or on the table.

The specialization of production induces specialization of consumption. Patrons of the entertainment industry, for example, entertain themselves less and less and have become more and more passively dependent on commercial suppliers. This is certainly true also of patrons of the food industry, who have tended more and more to be mere consumers — passive, uncritical, and dependent. Indeed, this sort of consumption may be said to be one of the chief goals of industrial production. The food industrialists have by now persuaded millions of consumers to prefer food that is already prepared. They will grow, deliver, and cook your food for you and (just like your mother) beg you to eat it. That they do not yet offer to insert it, pre-chewed, into your mouth is only because they have found no profitable way to do so. We may rest assured that they would be glad to find such a way. The ideal industrial food consumer would be strapped to a table with a tube running from the food factory directly into his or her stomach.

Perhaps I exaggerate, but not by much. The industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical — in short, a victim. When food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer associated with farming and with the land, then the eaters are suffering a kind of cultural amnesia that is misleading and dangerous. The current version of the "dream home" of the future involves "effortless" shopping from a list of available goods on a television monitor and heating precooked food by remote control. Of course, this implies and depends on a perfect ignorance of the history of the food that is consumed. It requires that the citizenry should give up their hereditary and sensible aversion to buying a pig in a poke. It wishes to make the selling of pigs in pokes an honorable and glamorous activity. The dreamer in this dream home will perforce know nothing about the kind or quality of this food, or where it came from, or how it was produced and prepared, or what ingredients, additives, and residues it contains — unless, that is, the dreamer undertakes a close and constant study of the food industry, in which case he or she might as well wake up and play an active and responsible part in the economy of food.

There is, then, a politics of food that, like any politics, involves our freedom. We still (sometimes) remember that we cannot be free if our minds and voices are controlled by someone else. But we have neglected to understand that we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else. The condition of the passive consumer of food is not a democratic condition. One reason to eat responsibly is to live free.

But if there is a food politics, there are also a food esthetics and a food ethics, neither of which is dissociated

from politics. Like industrial sex, industrial eating has become a degraded, poor, and paltry thing. Our kitchens and other eating places more and more resemble filling stations, as our homes more and more resemble motels. “Life is not very interesting,” we seem to have decided. “Let its satisfactions be minimal, perfunctory, and fast.” We hurry through our meals to go to work and hurry through our work in order to “recreate” ourselves in the evenings and on weekends and vacations. And then we hurry, with the greatest possible speed and noise and violence, through our recreation for what? To eat the billionth hamburger at some fast-food joint hellbent on increasing the “quality” of our life? And all this is carried out in a remarkable obliviousness to the causes and effects, the possibilities and the purposes, of the life of the body in this world.

One will find this obliviousness represented in virgin purity in the advertisements of the food industry, in which food wears as much makeup as the actors. If one gained one’s whole knowledge of food from these advertisements (as some presumably do), one would not know that the various edibles were ever living creatures, or that they all come from the soil, or that they were produced by work. The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared or fast food, confronts a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier, and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food.

And this peculiar specialization of the act of eating is, again, of obvious benefit to the food industry, which has good reasons to obscure the connection between food and farming. It would not do for the consumer to know that the hamburger she is eating came from a steer who spent much of his life standing deep in his own excrement in a feedlot, helping to pollute the local streams, or that the calf that yielded the veal cutlet on her plate spent its life in a box in which it did not have room to turn around. And, though her sympathy for the slaw might be less tender, she should not be encouraged to meditate on the hygienic and biological implications of mile-square fields of cabbage, for vegetables grown in huge

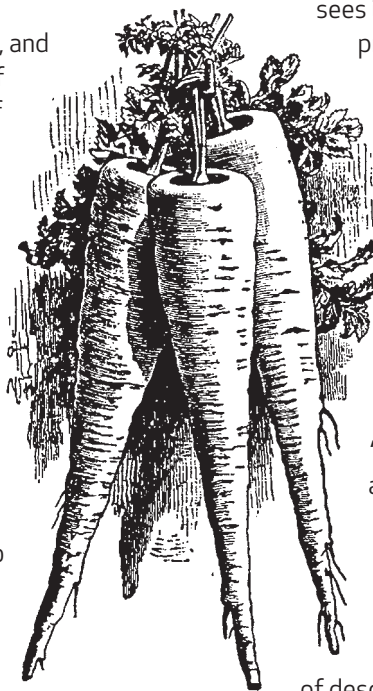
monocultures are dependent on toxic chemicals — just as animals in close confinement are dependent on antibiotics and other drugs.

The consumer, that is to say, must be kept from discovering that, in the food industry — as in any other industry — the overriding concerns are not quality and health, but volume and price. For decades now the entire industrial food economy, from the large farms and feedlots to the chains of supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, has been obsessed with volume. It has relentlessly increased scale in order to increase volume in order (presumably) to reduce costs. But as scale increases, diversity declines; as diversity declines, so does health; as health declines, the dependence on drugs and chemicals necessarily increases. As capital replaces labor, it does so by substituting machines, drugs, and chemicals for human workers and for the natural health and fertility of the soil. The food is produced by any means or any shortcut that will increase profits. And the business of the cosmeticians of advertising is to persuade the consumer that food so produced is good, tasty, healthful, and a guarantee of marital fidelity and long life.

It is possible, then, to be liberated from the husbandry and wifery of the old household food economy. But one can be thus liberated only by entering a trap (unless one sees ignorance and helplessness as the signs of privilege, as many people apparently do). The trap is the ideal of industrialism: a walled city surrounded by valves that let merchandise in but no consciousness out. How does one escape this trap? Only voluntarily, the same way that one went in: by restoring one’s consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one’s own part in the food economy. One might begin with the illuminating principle of Sir Albert Howard’s *The Soil and Health*, that we should understand “the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject.” Eaters, that is, must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used. This is a simple way of describing a relationship that is inexpressibly complex. To eat responsibly is to understand and enact, so far as one can, this complex relationship. What can one do?

Here is a list, probably not definitive:

1. Participate in food production to the extent that you can. If you have a yard or even just a porch box or a pot in a sunny window, grow something to eat in it. Make a little compost of your kitchen scraps and use it for fertilizer.





Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again. You will be fully responsible for any food that you grow for yourself, and you will know all about it. You will appreciate it fully, having known it all its life.

2. Prepare your own food. This means reviving in your own mind and life the arts of kitchen and household. This should enable you to eat more cheaply, and it will give you a measure of "quality control": you will have some reliable knowledge of what has been added to the food you eat.
3. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home. The idea that every locality should be, as much as possible, the source of its own food makes several kinds of sense. The locally produced food supply is the most secure, the freshest, and the easiest for local consumers to know about and to influence.
4. Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist. All the reasons listed for the previous suggestion apply here. In addition, by such dealing you eliminate the whole pack of merchants, transporters, processors, packagers, and advertisers who thrive at the expense of both producers and consumers.
5. Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production. What is added to food that is not food, and what do you pay for these additions?
6. Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening.
7. Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species.

The last suggestion seems particularly important to me. Many people are now as much estranged from the lives of domestic plants and animals (except for flowers and dogs and cats) as they are from the lives of the wild ones. This is regrettable, for these domestic creatures are in diverse ways attractive; there is much pleasure in knowing them.

And farming, animal husbandry, horticulture, and gardening, at their best, are complex and comely arts; there is much pleasure in knowing them, too.

It follows that there is great displeasure in knowing about a food economy that degrades and abuses those

arts and those plants and animals and the soil from which they come. For anyone who does know something of the modern history of food, eating away from home can be a chore... Though I am by no means a vegetarian, I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable in order to feed me. If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade. And I am getting almost as fussy about food plants. I like to eat vegetables and fruits that I know have lived happily and healthily in good soil, not the products of the huge, bechemicalized factory-fields that I have seen, for example, in the Central Valley of California. The industrial farm is said to have been patterned on the factory production line. In practice, it looks more like a concentration camp.

The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet.

People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the

dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food

and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater. The same goes for eating meat. The thought of the good pasture and of the calf contentedly grazing flavors the steak. Some, I know, will think it bloodthirsty or worse to eat a fellow creature you have known all its life. On the contrary, I think it means that you eat with understanding and with gratitude. A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. The pleasure of eating, then, may be the best available standard of our health. And this pleasure, I think, is pretty fully available to the urban consumer who will make the necessary effort.

I mentioned earlier the politics, esthetics, and ethics of food. But to speak of the pleasure of eating is to go beyond those categories. Eating with the fullest pleasure — pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance — is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.

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This excerpt of "The Pleasures of Eating" originally appeared in Berry's 1990 essay collection, *What Are People For?* Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Henry County, Kentucky and is the author of numerous books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. His works include *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* and *The Way of Ignorance*.

