The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals Study Guide

The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals by Michael Pollan

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Omnivore's Dilemma, by Michael Pollan, is a book about American eating habits, and the food dilemma American's have today. Pollan tries to help readers decide the answer to the age-old question: "What's for dinner?" by examining the different food paths available to modern man and by analyzing those paths to determine the best for health, stability, and sustainability.

Pollan begins the book by discussing the dilemma of the omnivore, a creature with vast choices for eating. Pollan decides to help discover the roots of the dilemma by examining the three primary food chains within the omnivore plan, those of the industrial food chain, the organic food chain, and the hunter-gathering food chain. He begins by examining the industrialized food industry, by following both corn and beef through the industrial process. His work on the corn fields of George Naylor teach him that the industrial system has made corn the number one product in nearly all items in a supermarket. His purchase of a steer allows him to see parts of the industrialized monoculture of beef production, showing him that here too, mass production has introduced a slew of environmental, health, ethical, and moral dilemmas. Following his journey, Pollan and his family eat a McDonald's meal, and Pollan realizes he is one of the few who actually understand how such a meal is created.

In the second section, Pollan examines the organic food sector, by following it from its original roots to its current state at such farms as Polyface Farm. Polyface is owned and operated by Joel Salatin, a man who believes that a return to nature through organic farming is the only logical choice for sustainability. Polyface is nearly entirely self sustaining, and Pollan's meal, made from the organic chicken, eggs, and sweet corn of the farm combined with other locally grown foods, is a reminder to him about the bounty of nature's flavors and the richness of non-processed food. In The final section, Pollan sets off to hunt and forage. Relying on the help from local hunters, Pollan learns to hunt and eventually shoots a wild boar. In addition, Pollan learns to forage for mushrooms, local wild yeast, and local fruits. Pollan's final meal, produced nearly entirely from his own work and the bounty of nature, show him that while such meals are, by far, the most rewarding in terms of a relationship to food, they are not sustainable.

Pollan's book allows the common reader to walk along a journey of food that not only teaches some valuable lessons, but also helps explain how and why the American food industry is the way it is. Pollan's writing is light, often humorous, but also filled with deep philosophical questions about why we choose to eat what we do.

Introduction and Chapter 1

Introduction and Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The Omnivore's Dilemma, by Michael Pollan, analyzes the eating habits and food chains of modern America in an attempt to bring readers closer to the origin of their foods. Pollan's blend of humor and philosophical questions about the nature of food serveS both to enlighten readers about the environment from which their food is harvested and to teach readers about alternative ways of eating.

In the Introduction, Pollan explains the fundamental theme of the book, that of the omnivore's dilemma. Pollan explains that, while specialized animals, such as the koala, have no issues with eating because their bodies have limited abilities to digest foods, omnivores such as humans who eat all kinds of foods have to decide each day what is good to eat and what is bad. They do this by consulting their memory, taste, smell, and culture to determine what foods are acceptable and safe. In modern America, however, the lack of a food culture makes us susceptible to any food fad that comes along. Pollan seeks to discover how humans now fit into the world-wide food chain by following the three threads of that chain: those of the industrial chain, the organic chain, and the hunter-gatherer chain. Pollan hopes that by examining each chain from beginning to end, he can bring together again the modern eater, and his or her original source of food.

Chapter one finds Pollan in the supermarket, wondering what the food in the market is actually made from. Pollan decides to discover what exactly he and all of us are really eating when we partake of the industrial food chain. He admits he was surprised to discover that at the beginning of that food chain, almost regardless of the food being eaten, was corn. Corn feeds the animals we eat, which lay the eggs we eat and produce the milk we use. It is also used in the soft drinks and alcohol we drink, the breading on foods, and in nearly all other foods as preservatives and additives. Corn is more efficient than most plants, since it recruits four carbon atoms instead of three during photosynthesis. This is important in that the plant is able to limit the water lost during this process, since it absorbs more carbon during each cycle. Additionally, corn takes in more carbon 13 than other plants, which is how modern scientists can tell how much corn a person is eating. A higher ratio of carbon 13 to carbon 12 in the flesh indicates a diet rich in corn-based products. Pollan points out that corn overtook much of our land as a result of our own coaxing. Corn, originally introduced to the English settlers by Native Americans, was more prevalent than wheat, and could be successfully grown in more areas. Further, it could be used for food, animal feed, fuel, and alcohol, and it could be stored. This made it a commodity that could be traded. Corn mutated early on to mass produce, but this also made the plant dependent on humans and animals for planting. Corn is self fertilized and wind pollinated, and Pollan describes this process in detail. Additionally, corn is one of the only plants adaptable to hybridization. It has, over time, adapted to become everything we need it to be to be a staple of industrialized food.

Chapter Two through Chapter Four

Chapter Two through Chapter Four Summary and Analysis

In chapter two, Pollan visits the farm of George Naylor, a man in Iowa who grown corn and soybeans. Naylor's farm has been handed down through several generations, and it has changed drastically, going from a fully sufficient diverse farm to a corn production mecca. Pollan explains this by discussing the various types of corn being grown today. Naylor himself avoids GMOs—or genetically modified organisms—but much of the corn planting population today relies solely on it for higher yields. Pollen gives the history of corn growing, discussing how the increased planting of corn has meant a drop is crop space for other plants. He also notes that the push for corn has led to the industrialization of animal farms. As a result, then, farms have largely been given over to the sole production of corn.

Naylor points out that another reason for corn's rise to fame is the push to turn government war factories into peacetime factories. These factories were changed over in the late '40s to begin producing products for farmers, such as fertilizer. One result of this is that hybrid corn, a fertilizer hog, is able to be grown without a disruption in fertility due to soil nutrient issues. Synthetic nitrogen, invented by Fritz Haber as a side effect of his work on bombs for Germany, meant that crops could be grown without care about the amount of usable nitrogen on the planet. However, this invention also relies on fossil fuel to fix the nitrogen. Now, farmers no longer have to rotate crops or spread manure for nitrogen to appear in the soil, but when all costs of planting and production are added together, Pollan notes, each acre of corn requires fifty gallons of fossil fuel. Pollan points out this industrial method of farming results in increased pollution, polluted groundwater and other major ecological concerns.

Naylor and Pollan discuss why farmers continue to plant corn. Originally, New Deal farm programs were set up to help the corn farmer in rough years. However, Nixon's secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz, began attempting to dismantle the New Deal programs. Butz began programs to push farmers to grow as much corn as possible, which included a new program to pay farmers directly for the difference between the target price and the selling price of corn. The end result, then, was that farmers could sell their corn at any price, resulting in a flooded market of cheap corn. Naylor points out that this maladaptive economy forces farmers to grow more corn even as prices fall, because they have to make ends meet. This, in turn, further drives down prices.

In chapter three, Naylor and Pollan take the corn they have harvested to the grain elevator and Pollan points out there is unused corn laying everywhere. Naylor explains that he and most others grow number 2 field corn, which is used as industrial raw material and in animal food. With the Chicago Board of Trade's grading system for corn in 1856, farmers could all grow number 2 corn and not worry about the quality, since all number 2 corn would be stored and shipped in mass. Pollan notes that the massive

amount of corn on the market has created a push to strive for more ways to use up the excess. This, in turn, has led to the industrialization of the food industry.

Pollan himself purchases a steer in chapter four, so that he can see the result of the corn on the meat industry. He notes that following WWII, animals began to be mass produced on CAFOs, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. These plants house thousands of animals at once in small areas, and Pollan blames these CAFOs on corn. To use excess corn, the industry began feeding it to the animals on CAFOs, even genetically modifying animals to be able to digest it. The end result is cheaper meat fed on cheap corn. Pollan's steer was originally born on Blair Ranch in South Dakota. He explains that typically, the cow would eat grass, but since cows on a grass diet take longer to reach slaughter weight, they are now fed corn, protein, and fat, along with a host of drugs immediately following weaning.

Pollan travels next to Poky feedlot to find that the cattle are fed a computer-calculated diet of corn, fat, synthetic estrogen, protein supplements, antibiotics, vitamins, hay, and silage. On examination, feeding corn to beef is unhealthy for both the cow and humans, but the USDA, in an effort to move more corn, grades beef based on marbling of fat, which is increased when they are fed corn. In addition, the feeding of protein to cows, often in the form of unused cow parts, has resulted in a wave of disease common in cannibalistic creatures. This is combated through the use of heavy antibiotics in the cattle. Pollan notes that, as a result of the grain we force these animals to consume, many are sick with bloat, cow acidosis, and other diseases. As Pollan tours the feedlot, he discovers a manure lagoon, sick animals, and his own steer, who appears healthy. Standing in several inches of manure, Pollan laments about the diseases the manure can bring to cows and the humans who eat them. But the antibiotics used to treat such problems results in super bugs that are both resistant to treatment and to human immune system responses. Pollan closes the chapter by pointing out that, if we are what we eat, humans are number 2 corn and oil.

Chapter Five through Chapter Seven

Chapter Five through Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

In chapter five, Pollan begins by noting that much of the corn we eat is not in the form of corn, but is processed into other compounds in a "wet mill". The process separates the skin, used in vitamins and supplements, the germ, which is used for oil, and the endosperm, which is used for its complex carbohydrates. This is broken down into one of many compounds, including starches, sugars, alcohols, acids, and others, which end up as a thousand other products found in processed food every day. Pollan is allowed to see this process at the Center for Crops Utilization Research at Iowa State University. Wet milling produces corn starch, which is then broken into glucose and sweeteners, including high fructose corn syrup. Pollan points out that all of this is the result of the surplus of corn we, as a nation, must consume.

Pollan discusses a visit he made to a development lab for General Mills, and he points out that breakfast cereal is the perfect example of corn-based processed food, as it takes corn meal, corn starch, and corn sweetener, along with other corn products, and creates a food source. He reminds readers that the food industry relies on two imperfect natural systems, the farm and the human. The farm is susceptible to natural disaster, whereas the human can only consume so much food. To combat the farm end, industrialized food markets have developed substitution, so that in a bad corn year, soybeans can be used in many foods, and vice versa. To combat the human end, marketers add "value" to their raw product, such as adding novelty, convenience, or medicine to make a product more appealing and more expensive. To combat how much a person can eat, Pollan points to the creation of the resistant starch. Slipping through the digestive tract without turning into calories, this fake sugar allows the human to eat more.

In chapter six, Pollan tells the story of the Alcoholic Republic, as historian W.J. Rorabaugh explained. In the early nineteenth century, Americans were drinking vast amounts of alcohol, due to an overabundance of corn on the market. To consume the excess, whiskey, which was portable and storable, was mass produced, and increased disease was a result. Pollan compares this to the Republic of Fat that exists today, where obesity, diabetes, heart problems, and cholesterol problems are vast epidemics. Pollan believes this is a direct result of the push to rid the country of the excess corn it produces every year. As the industry produces more high fructose corn syrup and uses it in more products, humans eat more sugars and more types of sugars. Primarily, soft drinks are the culprit, as HFCS is cheaper than sugar and therefore has been placed into nearly every soft drink on the market. This, in turn, lowered the price of soft drinks, so to combat lower profits, the soda industry began to supersize their sodas, enticing buyers to buy more and drink more. Supersizing, Pollan notes, was the brain child of McDonalds board of directors member David Wallerstein. Wallerstein originally worked

for a movie theater, where he learned he could entice people to buy larger, supersized items for more money. Obesity, it turns out, is a larger problem for the impoverished because cheaper foods are made with more energy-dense ingredients, making them much higher in fat and calories.

In chapter seven, Pollan treats his family to a processed meal from McDonalds. The threesome drive while eating their meal, which Pollan notes is appropriate, since the origins of the meal used so much petroleum. Pollan describes his joy as a child when he was allowed to eat fast food, and notes the still present aroma and flavor that makes fast food so appealing. When Issac remarks that his nugget doesn't taste like chicken, but tastes like a nugget, Pollan is reminded that fast food has a flavor that is only slightly related to the original food it is pretending to be. Pollan has to remind himself that his burger is made of a cow, and notes that he believes part of the draw of the industrial food chain is the obscuring of the actual animals used to create the food that is consumed. To close, Pollan points out that, for industrial food systems, the abundance of corn solves the problems of natural eaters. For lower income individuals, cheap corn provides cheap, high calorie foods for survival. From an energy standpoint, however, the industrial food system wastes a vast amount of non-renewable energy while helping to destroy the planet. For the farmer, the push to grow corn continues to lower prices, forcing more planting of the crop to avoid bankruptcy, in addition to a decrease in the health of the overall farm biosphere.

Chapter Eight through Chapter Nine

Chapter Eight through Chapter Nine Summary and Analysis

To study the pastoral food chain, as he calls it, Pollan begins his journey in chapter eight at Polyface farm, owned by Joel Salatin, helping to make hay. As he looks over the land, he explains that this farm is what one thinks of when they think of pastoral beauty. Pollan notes this is an alternative farm, dedicated to the old agrarian pastoral ideals, and that grass is the underlying foundation for the entire farm. The pastures are filled with a variety of native grasses, all of which benefit from grazing, and a host of creatures who help to make this farm fully functional without outside pesticides, fertilizers, or animal antibiotics or steroids. Pollan notes that this type of alternative farming was once coined "organic", but that now, "organic" can mean several things. Pollan's first phone conversation with Salatin showed him to be a fierce advocate for farming in line with one's world view. As Salatin notes, being organic doesn't make a farm sustainable, and it doesn't make it in line with nature, which is his primary goal. Salatin pushes for the right to opt out of industrialization.

In chapter nine, Pollan begins in Whole Foods, browsing for foods with which to make his store-purchased organic meal. He notes the various phrases used to market organic foods, such as "free range" and "hormone free". He uses the phrase Supermarket Pastoral to signify the literary genre that has become marketing tactics for the industrial organic food industry. The writers attempt to convey senses of well being and rely on phrases that a person seeks out to make themselves feel better about the foods they eat. Pollan notes that many of the products Whole Foods sells belong to the industrial organic food chain, and Pollan seeks to find out how closely these products match their Supermarket Pastoral. He learns that most organic milk comes from factory farms, that many organic cows are still housed in feedlots, and that much of the image of "organic" is completely false.

Pollan notes that People's Park, a trash strewn plot of land in Berkeley, began as a community vegetable garden in the 1960s. The idea was to produce uncontaminated, natural food. Several magazines began to feature stories about organic production and the movement began pushing not only for organic food, but a distribution system that was anti-capitalist and a food cuisine based on whole grains and unprocessed foods. Gene Kahn, founder of Cascadian Farm, an giant organic company, was part of this early organic movement. His original organic farm began in 1971, and by reading Sir Albert Howard, he learned how to grow organic foods. Howard's book, An Agricultural Testament, is considered an organic Bible and discusses topics such as the problem with fertilizers, and more importantly, the problem with reductionist science in farming. Kahn followed Howard's recommendations, and soon became a fair organic farmer. He admits that as he moved forward, the business became more like that of industrial. Pollan notes that by 1990, the federal government was also involved in the organic

market, as it sought to define what could be labeled organic. A battle ensued and the resulting definitions are weak, at best.

To see these industrial organic farms for himself, Pollan visits several in California, where he finds that many look exactly like their industrial cousins. The only difference, he notes, is that instead of chemicals, the company uses more benign methods. While he agrees that a change to organic farming is a huge step in the right direction, he also notes there is a price to pay for the industrialization of the business. He visits Earthbound Farm, another industrial organic company that started as a small farm, growing prewashed organic prebagged salad mix. When the demand rose for their goods, they partnered with industrial growers Mission Ranches. Pollan notes, however, that while the lettuce is certainly grown organically, it is processed industrially, and he begins to question the word "organic" in these settings. Pollan's last stop on his investigative tour is at Petaluma, a farm from which organic chickens are raised. After a tour, he is placed into a white hazmat suit and is escorted inside a huge chicken house, filled with twenty thousand chickens. Organic food is piped in, and although there are doors on either side of the house, they remain closed for the first five weeks of the chicken's lives.

Back at Whole Foods, Pollan chooses the foods from which he will make his industrial organic meal, including an organic chicken, organic kale, potatoes, squash, asparagus, and a spring salad mix. Dessert included organic ice cream with organic blueberries. He also buys himself an organic TV dinner, which he reports is rather like a conventional TV dinner. Pollan also notes his industrial organic meal turned out primarily good. At the end of the meal, Pollan asks himself if the organic food was better than processed and worth the price. He admits it tastes better, and was likely better for health, but this has yet to be proved scientifically. He also notes that, undoubtedly, even industrialized organic is better for the environment, better for farmers, and better for public health and for taxpayers. He does not imply this type of farming doesn't leave a giant footprint on the world, however. Pollan closes the chapter by noting that industrial organic is a compromise, and that compromise results in farming methods that are just as unsustainable as industrial food production.

Chapter Ten through Chapter Twelve

Chapter Ten through Chapter Twelve Summary and Analysis

In chapter ten, Pollan explains that Salatin is a grass farmer, in that everything he does at the farm begins with a variety of grasses . The idea behind grass farming is that the sun is the most natural and renewable source of energy and that by using it through photosynthesis, animals can be fed, which in turn, leads to the feeding of humans. To succeed with this farming, one has to know how grass grows and must spend a massive amount of time graphing and charting pastures in order to understand their growth. Salatin moves his cattle to a new pasture each day. This allows the grass a chance to recover while making sure all fields are grazed properly. Additionally, the manure of the cows is thus spread on all pastures without risking fouling the pasture with too many droppings. Each day, the cattle is moved to a new area. Pollan points out the simplistic view of a natural cow eating natural grass betrays the extremely complicated dance of nature as the cow, sun, grass, soil, insects, worms, and other components all work together to create a completely sustainable system. Pollan also points out that this farming method, based on perennial polyculture, offsets fossil fuel emission, increases biodiversity, and actually help keep the soil healthy.

At dinner that night, Pollan notes that the atmosphere is the setting he thinks of when he thinks of "organic". He points out that the entire farm strives to be off the grid, or operating outside of the industrial complex. Pollan learns that Polyface farm has been dedicated to alternative farming for three generations, and that Salatin's ancestors were rooted in an aversion to government and regulation. It was his father who invented many of the methods Salatin still employs on the farm.

In chapter eleven, Pollan explains how Salatin uses chickens to help him fertilize the pastures. Chicken pens are linked together across the width of the field. Each day, the pens are moved one length, and over time, the chickens cover each inch of the field, ensuring their manure is able to fertilize the entire pasture. The chickens eat the insects in the feces of the cows, as well as graze of the grass, helping to spread seeds. Salatin points out again that everything is connected on this farm. Pollan argues, too, that while the industrial system claims efficiency, that this method of farming is, in reality, far more efficient in terms of calories to produce calories. Efficiency is everywhere, and Pollan gives several examples of how Salatin uses animals working together to create a symbiotic system. Pollan is reminded, when he sees the pigs on the farm with their curly tails, that in industrial CAFOs, the tails of pigs are cut because in captivity they chew others' tails off. Salatin doesn't need to do this, as they pigs are free and happy. Pollan points out that Salatin lives almost completely off the grid, and that it is no wonder that the government does not encourage this form of farming, since Salatin buys practically nothing. Salatin also points out, however, that it isn't just the farm that lets him live outside of modern world, but also the 450 acres of woodland. He notes that this

woodland provides water, helps cool the farm, the trees help reduce evaporation in the fields, and will produce more carbon for use in the plants on the farm.

In chapter twelve, Pollan helps Salatin process chickens. During breakfast, Salatin explains that he avoids many of the USDA regulations for a processing facility by simply processing his chickens in an open air building with no walls. He complains that USDA rules are often made for the industrial plant, but also tend to exclude the smaller, local processing plant. After breakfast, the group heads to the processing center, where Pollan learns to slice the artery of the chicken's neck. Next, Pollan learns to eviscerate the chickens, and he admits he was not particularly good at the task. Once finished, customers arrive to pick up their freshly slaughtered chickens, and Salatin points out that these individuals can watch how their chickens are processed, thereby ensuring it is done properly, and humanely. He notes that one cannot regulate integrity. He admits their chickens are higher priced, but believes the price is well worth knowing what one is purchasing. As Salatin's wife took care of customers, Pollan and the others cart the chicken waste to the compost pile, where it is covered with fresh wood chips. While the pile sickens Pollan, he does realize that it is a true representation of the complexity of the entire natural system.

Chapter Thirteen through Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Thirteen through Chapter Fourteen Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirteen, Pollan explains that consumers can obtain Salatin's food in one of five ways. They can buy it at the farm store or at farmer's markets, through metropolitan buying clubs, in small shops in nearby towns, or through area restaurants that use his foods. On the drive to deliver eggs to a dealer, Salatin points out that he disagrees with the idea that organic food is too expensive, because the cost of organic food takes all costs into account, whereas store purchased food does not take environmental and health costs into account. Pollan agrees, pointing out that if each item in a store had to give photos of how it was produced, consumers may alter their eating habits. Bev, the egg dealer is a man on the brink of financial ruin, having tried to open a small processing plant and having been railroaded by the USDA. Salatin has helped Bev by supplying him with thousands of dollars worth of food to help him get by. Bev sells the product in nearby towns and notes he only has to sell the idea of the farm to sell the higher priced food. He sells to young mothers worried about their children and for those choosing to opt out of the industrial system. Salatin notes that a recent article pointed out the major difference between the industrial and the artisanal is that the industrial sells commodities, while the artisanal sells a special product.

The following day, Pollan rides with Salatin's brother, Art, as he makes deliveries to local restaurants. Pollan learns that local chefs love Polyface because the products are exceptionally tasty and have more full flavor. Pollan points out the alliance between chefs and small farmers is what helps local economies flourish, and notes that this movement is gaining steam. He argues that perhaps food should be the basis for a new revolution, since food is what sustains us and helps define our culture. He points out that buying local foods grown in a sustainable manner underwrites a set of values important to the people. This way of shopping does require more work and far less convenient meals, but Pollan points out that a new economy, based on a new way of farming, demands a new kind of eating, where people enjoy preparing meals. On his final day on the farm, Salatin reminds Pollan that the local food movement doesn't have to combat industrialization; it simply offers an alternative.

In chapter fourteen, Pollan prepares a meal of Polyface chickens, souffle made from Polyface eggs, sweet corn, locally grown rocket lettuce, and a local wine, for a family near Polyface he has been friends with for years. He discusses the importance of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, and notes that there are vast differences in the amounts of these types of materials even in animals from the same area, depending on how they were fed, which leads to consumers beginning to ask where, and how, their food was raised and processed. Pollan notes that the chicken, and the rest of the meal,

was phenomenal, which he attributes to the way it was grown and raised. He and his guests discuss the farm, and achieve what Pollan refers to as the "pleasures of the table", or a camaraderie.

Chapter Fifteen through Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Fifteen through Chapter Sixteen Summary and Analysis

Chapter Fifteen opens with Pollan discussing his final meal, that of the meal he makes using ingredients he hunted or gathered himself. Having never hunted, Pollan knows he will have to learn. Pollan also admits that this food chain, for most, is unrealistic, in that there is not enough game or wild plants and fungi to feed all of humanity. He knows this lesson will be one of ethics, and of the relationships between man and food, and he wants to create a meal in full consciousness of the foods involved and how they came to be on his table. Pollan meets Angelo Garro, who is a man passionate about food and the preparation of food and who takes Pollan under his wing in terms of hunting and gathering. As Pollan prepares for his hunting license, he finds himself more aware of his surroundings as he is in the woods. Running across some mushrooms, he is almost sure they are chanterelles, but he is not sure enough to eat them. Pollan realizes later he has run directly into the omnivore dilemma.

In chapter sixteen, Pollan again explains this dilemma. He expands his earlier discussion and notes that omnivores, when faced with a new food, often take a small amount and then wait for the results. If a stomachache developed, the food is not eaten again. Pollan notes humans have expanded this dilemma to include not only what is good to eat, but good to think as well. Humans, by nature, are designed to be omnivores, from our teeth to our metabolism. Omnivores use taste to help decide on food choices, as bitter foods are generally recognized by the human brain as toxic. Disgust is another tool of the omnivore, which helps to avoid foods that smell rotten, or that evoke a sense of disgust, such as eating a corpse or bodily fluids. Overcoming these immediate sensations, however, has sometimes been vital, as in the case of bitter medicine plants, and Pollan points out the human power of communication overcame the plant's defenses. We also overcame defenses in plants through cooking, grinding, or soaking our foods. Cooking changed the way humans ate and put us at the top of the food chain. We adapted cooking methods to make unfamiliar foods familiar, thereby using our culture to help ease the dilemma. These sets of rules, called cuisines, help pair foods that compliment one another not just in flavor, but in use, such as the pairing of raw fish with wasabi, which has antibacterial properties. Pollan points out that America has no consistent eating rules, which is why there is a national eating disorder. Pollan notes that in today's household, it is not uncommon for all family members to eat different foods at different times, because of the food fads each follows. The family dinner, one of the only remaining parts of American food culture, is in decline, which furthers the omnivore dilemma.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Seventeen Summary and Analysis

In chapter seventeen, Pollan attempts to eat a steak while reading Peter Singer's Animal Liberation, a book about the ethics of eating meat. Pollan notes that the issue of meat eating has been highly public as vegetarianism has become popular, and animals rights activists have highlighted the unethical treatment of animals in CAFOs. Singer's fundamental argument is that assuming a higher degree of intelligence in humans does not equate to a right to use others for out own ends. Therefore, why does a lack of intelligence in animals allow us to use them for our own ends? Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher, used the argument for marginal cases to argue a similar point. In his argument, there are humans whose mental functions are not even that of a chimp. We still include those individuals in our moral circle, so why not the chimp? Pollan goes through several arguments against such concepts, such as noting that animals eat one another, that they exist only because of us in the first place, and that the fact that we have the intelligence to question eating animals makes us different. However, in all cases, the animal rights activists have a convincing rebuttal. Singer's argument that a lifetime of suffering for an animal is not justified for the pleasure of a man's taste buds convinces Pollan to become vegetarian for a while, in order to be able to answer the question of whether eating meat can be ethical. In the course of a month, Pollan admits being vegetarian is less sociably accepted and much more difficult. He admits that losing meat does force the human to lose a part of his or her culture as well as his or her nature.

Pollan notes that some critics believe human pain is different than animal pain because humans are capable of suffering. Suffering involves higher emotions such as dread, shame, and fear. However, he also admits that the modern CAFO does not take even the pain of the animal into consideration. Pollan claims the CAFO offers a view of what industrialism is without morals, and he admits that vegetarianism seems a logical solution. However, he also points out that supporting farms such as Salatin, which takes into considering the needs, emotions, and desires of the animals, is an alternative solution. Pollan notes that these animals in the wild would have far more painful lives, and deaths. He points out that animal rights activists look at the individual animal rather than the species, and that this does not apply in the natural world. He also points out that in some places in the world the only use of the land is for grazing and hunting. Vegetarianism would render that land useless. However, by supporting local, sustainable food production, both sides of the argument can at least marginally succeed.

Pollan returns at the end of the chapter to discuss his steer, 534. He could not watch his steer be processed, as the company would not allow him to watch, but he was able to ask an auditor of the plant for a detailed account. In short, the cow is struck through the head with a seven inch long steel bolt, which usually kills it. The animal is then hung and his throat is cut so he can bleed out. Some cows are not killed with the first strike to

the head. Pollan reflects that this is precisely why the open processing area at Salatin's farm is so powerful. Buyers can see each and every chicken killed at the farm and can see exactly how it is processed. Pollan closes the chapter by noting that perhaps if we, as humans, return to knowing where and how our food is processed, we can eat without agony or fear.

Chapter Eighteen through Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Eighteen through Chapter Nineteen Summary and Analysis

In chapter eighteen, Pollan admits he enjoyed hunting more than he anticipated. He is hunting with Garro for wild boar, and Garro teaches him about tracking animals. Garro hunts for the delicious food, as he explains, and not for the thrill. After a day of searching for the elusive pig, Pollan experiences Hunter's Eye, or the feeling of everything coming into sharp focus. He is fully relaxed but fully aware, and he likens the feeling to being stoned. Ortega y Gasset, a writer, believed hunting returned humans back to nature, and Pollan agrees. After a relaxing lunch, Pollan and Richard, another hunter, come upon four large boars. Pollan goes to take the shot, but his gun is not cocked. He feels ashamed and knows he was not ready for the hunt.

A month later, he and Garro again go out, only this time, Pollan is ready. When they come upon a group of boars, Pollan takes the shot and succeeds in killing a boar. He admits his emotions were all over the board, but primarily at the time, he was happy. He has his photo taken with the animal, but is then faced with having to eviscerate it. With help from Garro he succeeds, but has to break away as disgust overwhelms him. Rozin, the original researcher of the omnivore dilemma, noted that disgust can be a result of situations that remind us of our animal nature. Later that night, when he views the photos taken of him next to the pig, he is equally disgusted, as he sees the grin on his face. He is ashamed at the immense pleasure killing an animal has given him. After a few months, Pollan wonders why the pictures shamed him so, and he wonders which is more accurate, the happiness he felt, or the shame. He notes that all hunters have to face this dilemma and that they eventually realize that both are simply sides of the same coin.

In chapter nineteen, Pollan remarks how curious it is that human past-times often play at self reliance, such as hunting for mushrooms. Mushroom hunters are hugely secretive, but again Garro comes to Pollan's aid, and offers to take him hunting for chanterelles. While Garro is able to spot the mushrooms quickly, Pollan admits he has less luck. He points out that mushrooms highlight the omnivore dilemma, in that they are divine, but can also be very deadly. He also points out that humans will happily eat what another human eats, because humans can communicate the safety of food. He speaks with several mycologists over the course of several months, and discovers that mushrooms are quite mysterious. The fungi are simply the tip of a mostly invisible organism that lives underground, and as such, they are hard to observe. They feed on organic animal matter, decomposing it to help local plants, thereby helping to feed themselves. Mushrooms can carry serious toxins that produce a range of effects, from hallucinations to death.

Pollan again goes mushroom hunting, this time with Anthony Tassinello and a group of hunters, who take him to hunt burn morels, or mushrooms that rise following a forest fire. To help Pollan "get his eyes on", or locate mushrooms, the group leaves some in sight for him to locate as they teach him about mushrooms and about hunting them in the wild. Pollan discusses the oddity of the forest, noting that here, everything tries to remain hidden, whereas in a garden, foods tend to display themselves. He also explains that burn morels pop up after a fire in order to release spores so they can move to a new location, where there is food to survive on. Pollan realizes the forest has been part of the human food chain for thousands of years, and he feels grateful for the morels. On the way down the mountain after finding over sixty pounds, the group sees more hunters coming up, and they immediately begin calling buyers, selling off their mushrooms before the price drops.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty, Pollan prepares his final meal and admits it was perfect for him. He attempts to use only items he has grown, gathered, or hunted, and invites those who helped him. To be true to his meal, he attempts to gather salt from a local salt pond, but even after processing, the salt smells extremely toxic and he declines to use it. Additionally, Pollan is forced to abandon the appetizer of fresh abalone. Instead, he makes fava bean toasts from the beans in his garden and from bread he makes after gathering his own yeast. He also asks Garro to bring pate made from the boar Pollan killed and makes two entrees, those of braised and grilled pig. He serves wine from Garro, lettuce for salad from his garden, and a cherry tart made from a neighbor's cherries. To top the meal, Pollan makes an herbal tea from foraged chamomile.

When Pollan arrives at Garro's to pick up his pig, he helps Garro chop the meat, and the men make a ragout for lunch. Pollan is surprised he is able to eat the meat without any reservation, but he knows this is the closing act of his hunt. Back home, as he begins to cook, Pollan realizes he has taken on a large task. He points out how ironic it is that to make a delicious meal, we destroy a food, only to combine it with others to become wonderful again.

At dinner, Pollan gives thanks to those who have helped him on his journey. He realizes he wants to say thanks to the animals and plants involved in the meal, but as he and his guests eat, he also realizes the thanks is already in the meal, and in the culture that the meal is bringing to the table. Stories are told about near misses in hunting and foraging, and Pollan admits the food is delicious. Pollan notes, however, that for him, the meal was perfect not for the food, but for the fact that it was completely paid for, in that he himself took part in the killing of each creature now being used to feed him and his guests. He notes that to eat such a meal is a reminder of the fact that eating industrially lets people forget the massive total cost of the food they eat. These two meals are two ends of a long spectrum, where one side is ignorant, and the other is completely aware. Pollan again points out that neither end is sustainable, and that both should be reserved for an occasional ritual meal. He closes the book by suggesting that, in finding a middle ground, Americans can again develop an eating culture that allows us, as omnivores, to eat without fear, and to eat in full consciousness of our food.

Characters

Michael Pollan

Michael Pollan is the author of the book, which revolves around his own journeys attempting to follow the ingredients in his food from field to plate. Pollan is a journalist, who in this book seeks to follow the three basic food chains in use today: those of the industrial, the organic, and the hunted and gathered. Pollan is not a scientist, so he is able to bring humor, education, and insight to his work, and is able to explain, in detail, all he experiences without overwhelming the reader. Pollan actively pursues answers in his quest as he helps harvest and deliver the corn that eventually ends up as much of his industrialized meal at a McDonalds. He helps another farmer move cattle for grazing, as well as participates in the killing and processing of organic chickens at Polyface Farm. He then uses the goods he helped produce at the organic farm to present a local family with an entirely organic meal. Finally, Pollan and several others participate in hunting, gathering mushrooms, and other local ingredients in order to make an entire meal of non-processed, personally foraged foods. Through his journey, Pollan forms opinions about the harm in the overproduction of corn, the joys and necessity of sustained agriculture, and the unrealistic notion of being able to personally hunt and gather for one's sustenance. Pollan's research allows the reader to see where his or her food comes from and helps show alternate ways of farming that could be used to help ensure health for the planet, as well as for the humans who live off that planet.

George Naylor

George Naylor is a farmer near Churdan in Greene County, Iowa who owns 320 acres, which originally belonged to his family. Naylor is a shy, large man with a beard and gravelly voice, but his political opinions when it comes to farming transform him into a fiery speaker. Naylor's grandfather moved to America from England in the 1880s, and he began his farming in 1919. However, the farm has changed drastically over the years, and Naylor can barely make a living now. He and his family live primarily off the earnings of his wife, Peggy, rather than from direct farm income or even subsidy payments. Naylor began farming again in 1976, as at the time, the price of corn skyrocketed. Ever since, however, farm subsidies have dropped consistently, and although he and his family continue to survive, there is little left. Naylor grows corn and soybeans in rotation, in an effort to preserve the nitrogen in the soil. Pollan visits Naylor's farm in the book to learn about corn production as an industrialized system, and Pollan follows Naylor's corn from the field through harvest to delivery at the grain elevator. Naylor knows he is essentially growing corn for the industrial machine, but he also feels that farming is vital to the economy.

Fritz Haber

Fritz Haber was the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1920 for "improving the standards of agriculture and the well-being of mankind" (pg. 43). During WWI, Haber worked for Germany, and created synthetic nitrate, which allowed Germany to continue making explosives following the loss of the use of Chilean mines. This invention also happened to bring a source of fertility to lands over planted. Haber was also responsible for the creation of several poisonous gases used in the war. His wife, appalled at his actions, committed suicide following the war. Haber, a Jew, was forced to flee Germany in the 1930s, and he died, poor, in 1934

Earl

Earl "Rusty" Butz was the secretary of agriculture under President Nixon. Butz and others coordinated a huge sale of corn to the Russians in 1972, which created a grain shortage in the US which, combined with bad weather, spiked prices through the roof. By the following year, those high prices had spread throughout the food chain, causing grocery prices to also skyrocket. In an effort to change the food system, Butz began seeking ways to encourage overproduction on the part of the farmers, and began dismantling the New Deal grain system, putting into place instead direct payments to farmers that would cover the difference between the market price and the target price. The end result was a huge surplus of corn which, Pollan believes, is the root of the problem with the American food system.

David Wallerstein

David Wallerstein is the man Pollan claims is responsible for the invention of supersize. During the 50s and 60s, Wallerstein worked for a theater chain, where he attempted to bring in more income by expanding sales of soda and popcorn. He determined that people would not buy more than one of things, due to resulting guilt, so instead, Wallerstein created the supersize, allowing consumers to purchase more, at a higher price, without the guilt of gluttony. In 1968, Wallerstein went to work for McDonalds, and slowly convinced Ray Kroc, the company founder, to allow a research study, where fries and drinks were supersized. A spike in sales proved his point, and the supersize was implemented.

Joel Salatin

Joel Salatin is an organic farmer and rancher in California where Pollan goes to learn about sustainable farming practices. Polyface Farm raises beef, turkeys, chicken, beef, rabbits, pigs, eggs, vegetables, and fruits, all through organic and sustainable means. The only thing from the outside brought in is the chicken feed. Salatin uses crop rotation to keep soil nutrients, and uses pasture rotation and natural processes to feed his cattle. His chickens are used to help replace nitrogen in the pastures through their feces, while

pigs are used to help compost the products of chicken slaughter, which also happens on the farm. Salatin and a few other farmers are leading the way for a more sustainable way of growing and processing food.

Sir Albert Howard

Sir Albert Howard is the author of "The Soil and Health" and "An Agricultural Testament", both of which are considered primary books for the organic movement. Howard was born in 1873 in England, and spent thirty years researching in India, where he provided the philosophies for the idea of treating health of soil, plant, man and animal as one process. Howard sought to stop the use of NPK, or fertilizer, by pointing out that the use of artificial means to produce food would eventually harm the human population, along with the rest of the natural world. He also encouraged a return to nature for agricultural blueprints, pointing out that only by working with nature could man hope to build a sustainable system.

Angelo Garro

Angelo Garro is a fifty eight year old Italian man with brown eyes who teaches Pollan about how to hunt, and how to prepare the meat that is hunted. Garro is passionate about food, particularly foods that remind him of Italy. Garro takes Pollan on several hunts for wild boar, and helps him clean and process the boar he does shoot. Garro, Pollan notes, is his Virgil, in that it is Garro that explains to Pollan the thrill of hunting one's own food, and it is Garro that really helps Pollan to create his final meal, which is completely hunted or gathered.

Anthony Tassinello

Anthony Tassinello is a private chef who helps Pollan discover the joys of burn morel hunting. Tassinello is a tall, thin man who thrives on hunting mushrooms, particularly those that appear following a forest burn. Tassinello proves to be a wonderful teacher, helping Pollan be able to better spot edible mushrooms, and teaching him theories of why and how mushrooms grow.

Bev Eggleston

Bev Eggleston is a marketer for EcoFriendly Foods, a company who helps Joel Salatin sell his sustainable food produce. Bev sells Salatin's goods from booths at farmer's markets. Bev himself has recently fallen into financial trouble after he built a processing plant to USDA specs, only to have the USDA pull their inspector, and effectively shut down his small plant. Salatin helps Bev as much as possible, but Pollan believes Bev will not recover from the financial loss, since there is no incentive for the USDA to reopen the plant.

Objects/Places

Omnivore

An omnivore is a creature that eats both plants and animals as primary sources of food.

C4

C4 is the botanical nickname for a group of plants, including corn, that create compounds during photosynthesis that have four carbon atoms.

Heterosis

Heterosis (hybrid vigor) refers to plants that have better yields than either of their parents.

Ammonium nitrate

Ammonium nitrate is the principle ingredient in making explosives, and also a prime source of nitrogen for plants.

New Deal Farm Programs

The New Deal Farm programs were an attempt by the government to create a grain reserve. For commodities that can be stored, the government established a target price based on costs of production. If the market price dropped below that amount, the farmer could either choose to sell his corn on the market or take out a loan against his corn from the government. If the corn prices did not rise, he could give his corn to the government as payment for the loan.

Bt Corn

Bt Corn is corn that has been genetically engineered to produce its own pesticide.

CAFO

CAFO stands for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, which are densely populated industrialized buildings where modern farm animals are raised in bulk.

Rumen

A rumen is the highly evolved digestive organ of ruminants, which contains a bacteria that allows these animals to convert grass into protein through digestion.

BSE

BSE stands for bovine spongiform encephalopathy, which is also known as mad cow disease. This disease was commonly spread through the practice of feeding cow parts back to cows through their feed.

Organic

The word organic, originally coined by editor J.I. Rodale, was originally used to convey the idea that food should be produced by nature rather than by machine. Over time, however, organic has come to be defined by the government very loosely, and can indicate only a very loose association with the original meanings.

Supermarket Pastoral

Pollan describes this as the literary style used to convey a certain feeling to consumers through the labels of "organic" foods. This literary style attempts to market the concept of organic through verbs and adjectives that make the consumer feel better about their purchases and the food they are eating, regardless of the actual content of the food.

NPK

NPK stands for nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium, which are the nutrients required for plants to grow in soil.

Hunter's Eye

Hunter's eye is the extreme perception some hunters experience while watching for animals, which include a sharpness of focus and depth of field.

Atavism

Atavism is a reverting of a trait to a previous evolutionary state, otherwise known as an evolutionary throwback. Pollan notes that some believe that by hunting, humans return to nature because it causes us to revert back to a more animalistic form of ourselves.

Themes

Omnivore Dilemma

The primary theme of the novel is the Omnivore Dilemma. As author Pollan describes it, the Omnivore Dilemma was originally discussed by writers such as Rousseau and Brillat-Savarin, but the actual term was coined by research psychologist Paul Rozin, in his 1976 paper titled, "The Selection of Foods by Rats, Humans, and Other Animals". The dilemma, as put by Rozin, is that omnivores have a vast choice when eating. Specialized animals, such as the koala, know only to eat one single food because that is all its body is designed to eat. Omnivores, on the other hand, have a huge variety of food to choose from, and those animals must rely in the wild on skills such as food recognition, memory, taste, smell, and culture to determine which foods are safe to eat, and which are harmful. Pollan takes this one step further and notes that, today in America, the Omnivore dilemma is particularly problematic because Americans, unlike other cultures such as France or Italy, do not have food cultures to help guide our choices. Instead, modern man has to listen to a barrage of marketers, all of whom want to tell people to eat one thing and not another, often directly countering one another. The end result is that Americans no longer know which foods really are good and which are harmful.

In addition, Pollan points out, Americans have become completely isolated from the original source of their food and rarely have any idea what is really in the foods at the supermarket they choose to buy. Because of the industrialization of the food industry, Pollan points out, Americans purchase quick convenience foods without really understanding what the food they are eating represents. To combat this addition to the omnivore dilemma, Pollan sets out to discover where and how the food within the three omnivore food chains is developed. These chains are the industrialized food chain, the organic chain, and the hunter gatherer. At each link in the chain, Pollan analyzes the food he eats in the three settings, thereby bringing the reader, and himself, closer to the chain and understanding where the food originates. In the end he realizes it is only through a complete understanding of the causes of the omnivore dilemma that one is able to find a solution that fits the moral, ethical, natural, and evolutionary needs of ones self.

Nature Versus Industry

Another major theme throughout the book is the vast discrepancy between what Pollan calls the "logic of nature and the logic of human industry". Pollan's primary contention with the industrialized agricultural system is use of monoculture in modern farming. Entire, vast farms are dedicated to growing single crops year after year, without the crop rotation necessary to feed nutrients back into the soil. While the practice does maximize efficiency and yield amazing crops, it also causes an equally vast number of environmental, health, and ethical problems. Monoculture is also used in giant CAFOs,

or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, where masses of a single animal are held, raised, and slaughtered in a small area. This mass production, which introducing ethical issues about the treatment of animals, also tends to increase the spread of disease.

Pollan points out several times throughout the book that nature, the best, most sustainable farmer, diversifies her crops and her animals, and uses all possible natural resources to maintain a balance between all forces that is sustainable. Modern industrial farming, Pollan notes, is not sustainable, because it oversimplifies the effects of nature, and underestimates the amount of destruction of modern methods on soil, air, water, and even the food we consume. Pollan believes that a return to the true meaning of organic farming, where farmers use crop rotation, grazing, composting, and other natural methods, will provide the only sustainable source of food, while at the same time preserving the natural order that makes any life really possible.

Relationship Between Food and Humans

Another theme Pollan uses throughout the novel is that of the intense connection between the foods we eat and our relationships with nearly all other organisms on the planet. What we eat, how we eat it, and where we eat it all contribute to the transformation of eating into culture. Our planet has drastically changed as a result of agriculture, and our eating defines our relationship with plants, animals, fungi, and all other parts of nature. Many of the plants, such as corn, Pollan argues, have developed solely as a result of the human need for the product and thereby rely on us for their survival just as we rely on them.

Industrial eating, however, destroys these relationships, or at best hides them to the point of invisibility, thereby destroying not only the symbiotic relationship but also the culture that would stem from it. This costly journey, as Pollan puts it, away from nature allows us to forget the damage we cause the environment, and to allow inhumane treatment of animals, simply because of the hidden nature of the process. If the industrial process were forced to be visible, Pollan believes we as Americans would change the way we eat, thereby regaining the lost relationships to our food, which would in turn help heal the environment as well as our own bodies.

Style

Perspective

Michael Pollan is a journalist and sets out on the research for his book by simply wondering why the question of what to eat is so challenging for humans. As a journalist Pollan is inquisitive, and his writing reflects this questioning nature. Although he does cover all the food chains, he is, arguably, biased for the organic method of agriculture. It is clear through his writing that Pollan is against governmental control of anything and he is highly concerned about the state of the world in terms of the effects of industrialization on plants, soils, air quality, animals, and humans. Pollan's experiences as a gardener also show his propensity for natural foods.

It is equally clear that Pollan has little experience with hunting, as he must first learn how to fire a weapon. While he does admit to enjoying the hunt, he does not hunt regularly. As a result of these limitations and opinions, Pollan's book is definitely slanted toward the use of organic and sustainable farming. This bias, however, is more based on his experiences throughout the book than his opinions prior to writing the book. One is able to understand Pollan's opinions about which foods are better for the human simply because he presents all sides of the story and then explains why he chooses the foods he does. The end result is a book that has a definite opinion but one that does not preach without properly explaining the situation.

Tone

Pollan's tone in the novel ranges drastically from section to section. In some areas of the novel, Pollan takes on a teaching tone as he instructs the reader about the more scientific elements of food, such as types of corn, how corn reproduces, and how chickens are cut up for processing. In other areas, Pollan's tone is philosophical as he tackles some of the tough questions surrounding discussions of food, such as the ethics of eating meat, the ethics of marketing food as organic, and the effects of governmental control on corn production. During other parts of the novel, Pollen appears combative as he struggles with governmental policies that actually serve to harm the local farmer, and he struggles with his own ethical concerns about arguments against meat eating. Through it all, however, Pollan's tone is light, and his writing is often tinted with humor, both at himself and at the world around him, making his writing very easy to read and to follow. One doesn't feel pressured to agree with Pollan, but one does feel better educated and better informed. It is because of Pollan's light tone and his willingness to go outside of his comfort zone that the book is so successful, in that Pollan's stresses on the culture and relationships of foods is vital to the novel, but his tone makes these heavy topics fun and insightful.

Structure

The novel is broken into three major section, each of which deals with an individual sector of the food market. After a short introduction where Pollan explains the underlying omnivore dilemma, the book opens with part I, which analyzes the industrial food process, primarily the processing of corn. This section contains seven distinct chapters, each of which builds on the prior to form a continuing story of how corn is processed from farm to the fast food meal.

The second section, part II, focuses on the pastoral food sector, or the organic farming techniques currently in use. This section follows both the large "organic" industrial farms as well as some smaller, local farms to discover how food makes it from field to plate, and contains seven chapters.

The final section of the book, part III, focuses on what Pollan calls the "personal", which for him is hunting and gathering food. This section follows Pollan as he hunts his own meat and forages for plants, fruits, and other goods in the wild. This section contains six chapters. At the end of the book, there is an acknowledgments section, a source section, and an index. In total, the book is 450 pages in length.

Quotes

"It is very much in the interest of the food industry to exacerbate our anxieties about what we eat, the better to then assuage them with new products."
Introduction, p. 5

"The Omnivore's Dilemma is about the three principle food chains that sustain us today: the industrial, the organic, and the hunter-gatherer. Different as they are, all three food chains are systems for doing more or less the same thing: linking us, through what we eat, to the fertility of the earth and the energy of the sun."
Introduction, p. 7

"The dual identity also made corn indispensable to the slave trade: Corn was both the currency traders used to pay for slaves in Africa and the food upon which slaves subsisted during their passage to America. Corn is the protocapitalist plant."
Chap. 1, p. 26

"Haber's story embodies the paradoxes of science: the double edge to our manipulations of nature, the good and evil that can flow not only from the same man but the same knowledge. Haber brought a vital new source of fertility and an awful new weapon into the world..."
Chap. 2, p. 44

"The short, unhappy life of a corn fed feedlot steer represents the ultimate triumph of industrial thinking over the logic of evolution."
Chap. 4, p. 68

"We've come to think of "corn fed" as some kind of old fashioned virtue, which it may well be when you're referring to Midwestern children, but feeding large quantities of corn to cows for the greater part of their lives is a practice neither particularly old nor virtuous."
Chap. 4, p. 75

"One of the bacteria that almost certainly resides in the manure I'm standing in is particularly lethal to humans. Escherichia coli....is a relatively new strain of the common intestinal bacteria...that thrives in feedlot cattle, 40 percent of which carry it in their gut. Ingesting as few as tend of these microbes can cause a fatal infection; they produce a toxin that destroys human kidneys."
Chap. 4, p. 82

"But the Western mind can't bear and opt out option. We're going to have to refight the Battle of the Little Bighorn to preserve the right to opt out, or your grandchildren and mine will have no choice but to eat amalgamated, irradiated, genetically prostituted,

barcoded, adulterated fecal spam from the centralized processing conglomerate."
Chap. 8, p. 132

"But what about the "free range" lifestyle promised on the label? True, there's a little door in the shed leading out to a narrow grassy yard. But the free range story seems a bit of a stretch when you discover that the door remains firmly shut until the birds are at least five or six weeks old - for fear they'll catch something outside - and the chickens are slaughtered only two weeks later."
Chap. 9, p. 140

"The inspiration for organic was to find a way to feed ourselves more in keeping with the logic of nature, to build a food system that looked more like an ecosystem that would draw its fertility and energy from the sun. To feed ourselves otherwise was "unsustainable", a word that's been so abused we're apt to forget what it very specifically means: Sooner or later it must collapse."
Chap. 9, p. 183

"In a way, the most morally troubling thing about killing chickens is that after a while it is no longer morally troubling."
Chap. 10, p. 235

"But what happens when the choice is, as Singer writes, between "a lifetime of suffering for a nonhuman animal, and the gastronomic preferences of a human being?" You look away - or you stop eating animals."
Chap. 17, p. 312

"If our concern is for the health of nature - rather than, say, the internal consistency of our moral code or the condition of our souls - then eating animals may sometimes be the most ethical thing to do."
Chap. 17, p. 327

"Putting a great dish on the table is our way of celebrating the wonders of form we humans can create from this matter - this quantity of sacrificed life - just before the body takes its first destructive bite."
Chap. 20, p. 405

Topics for Discussion

In the book, Pollan argues that of the three food chains he follows, only the organic chain is sustainable. Why is this? What reasons does he give? Why does he claim the others are not sustainable? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Pollan discusses vegetarians in his book when he is discussing the ethics of eating animals. He brings up the AMC, or argument for marginal cases, and notes that, according to some such as Singer, we should treat animals as we treat humans because they are animals just as capable as some humans (such as infants and the mentally retarded). Do you agree with the statement or disagree? Why? What does Pollan eventually conclude about his own opinion of this argument? What are his reasons for his opinion?

Discuss the Omnivore Dilemma, as explained by Michael Pollan. What is the fundamental underlying problem for the omnivore that causes the dilemma, according to the original person who used the term, Rosin? How does Pollan adapt the term? What does Pollan eventually blame the issue on? What forces do humans have to combat the dilemma, and why does Pollan believe those do not work in the modern supermarket?

Explain the industrial corn process, as Michael Pollan follows it. Where does his journey begin? Where does the corn from this place end up? How does this corn tie into the story of Pollan's own steer? How does it tie into the processing plant? Finally, how does it relate to the meal at the end of the food chain, that of the McDonalds meal Pollan feeds his family? What is Pollan's overall opinion about corn, and the governmental involvement in the processing of this product?

To follow the second food chain, Pollan must first dissect the term "organic". Why is this term such a difficult one to define? What are various meanings of organic? What is the main difference between how the term was originally envisioned and how the government now defines the term? Does "organic" necessarily mean humane, according to Pollan? Why or why not?

Pollan argues that one of the primary problems with American eating is that, unlike other cultures, America has no food culture. What does he mean by this statement? How does this differentiate us from, say, the French? How do marketers play on this lack of a food culture? What is the end result, according to Pollan?

One of Pollan's arguments in the novel against industrialized agriculture is that there is a vast discrepancy between what Pollan calls the "logic of nature and the logic of human industry". What does he mean by this? What are the differences between how nature uses the land and how industrialized agriculture uses the land? Why are these differences important?

Pollan's final journey in the book is to hunt and forage his own food. He notes that the end result of his journey is the "perfect meal", made such by the meal's ability to give an

opportunity to "eat in full consciousness". He notes that he was able to pay the full karmic price of his food. What does this mean? Why do you think this is important to Pollan? Do you agree with the importance of this? Why or why not?