

## **THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA -- by Michael Pollan**

*Selections from critical notices and the first few paragraphs of the author's Introduction.*

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### **Critical praise**

“As lyrical as *What to Eat* is hard-hitting, Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals...* may be the best single book I read this year. This magisterial work, whose subject is nothing less than our own omnivorous (i.e., eating everything) humanity, is organized around two plants and one ecosystem. Pollan has a love-hate relationship with ‘Corn,’ the wildly successful plant that has found its way into meat (as feed), corn syrup and virtually every other type of processed food. American agribusiness’ monoculture of corn has shoved aside the old pastoral ideal of ‘Grass,’ and the self-sustaining, diversified farm based on the grass-eating livestock. In ‘The Forest,’ Pollan ponders the earliest forms of obtaining food: hunting and gathering. If you eat, you should read this book.”—*Newsday*

“*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is an ambitious and thoroughly enjoyable, if sometimes unsettling, attempt to peer over these walls, to bring us closer to a true understanding of what we eat—and, by extension, what we should eat.... It is interested not only in how the consumed affects the consumer, but in how we consumers affect what we consume as well.... Entertaining and memorable. Readers of this intelligent and admirable book will almost certainly find their capacity to delight in food augmented rather than diminished.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“On the long trip from the soil to our mouths, a trip of 1,500 miles on average, the food we eat often passes through places most of us will never see. Michael Pollan has spent much of the last five years visiting these places on our behalf.” —*Salon.com*

“The author of *Second Nature* and *The Botany of Desire*, Pollan is willing to go to some lengths to reconnect with what he eats, even if that means putting in a hard week on an organic farm and slitting the throats of chickens. He’s not Paris Hilton on *The Simple Life*.” —*Time*

“A fascinating journey up and down the food chain, one that might change the way you read the label on a frozen dinner, dig into a steak or decide whether to buy organic eggs. You’ll certainly never look at a Chicken McNugget the same way again.... Pollan isn’t preachy; he’s too thoughtful a writer and too dogged a researcher to let ideology take over. He’s also funny and adventurous.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“[Pollan] does everything from buying his own cow to helping with the open-air slaughter of pasture-raised chickens to hunting morels in Northern California. This is not a man who’s afraid of getting his hands dirty in the quest for better understanding. Along with wonderfully descriptive writing and truly engaging stories and characters, there is a full helping of serious information on the way modern food is produced.” —*BookPage*

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## Introduction

What should we have for dinner?

This book is a long and fairly involved answer to this seemingly simple question. Along the way, it also tries to figure out how such a simple question could ever have gotten so complicated. As a culture we seem to have arrived at a place where whatever native wisdom we may once have possessed about eating has been replaced by confusion and anxiety. Somehow this most elemental of activities—figuring out what to eat—has come to require a remarkable amount of expert help. How did we ever get to a point where we need investigative journalists to tell us where our food comes from and nutritionists to determine the dinner menu?

For me the absurdity of the situation became inescapable in the fall of 2002, when one of the most ancient and venerable staples of human life abruptly disappeared from the American dinner table. I'm talking of course about bread. Virtually overnight, Americans changed the way they eat. A collective spasm of what can only be described as carbophobia seized the country, supplanting an era of national lipophobia dating to the Carter administration. That was when, in 1977, a Senate committee had issued a set of "dietary goals" warning beef-loving Americans to lay off the red meat. And so we dutifully had done, until now.

What set off the sea change? It appears to have been a perfect media storm of diet books, scientific studies, and one timely magazine article. The new diet books, many of them inspired by the formerly discredited Dr. Robert C. Atkins, brought Americans the welcome news that they could eat more meat and lose weight just so long as they laid off the bread and pasta. These high-protein, low-carb diets found support in a handful of new epidemiological studies suggesting that the nutritional orthodoxy that had held sway in America since the 1970s might be wrong. It was not, as official opinion claimed, fat that made us fat, but the carbohydrates we'd been eating precisely in order to stay slim. So conditions were ripe for a swing of the dietary pendulum when, in the summer of 2002, the *New York Times*

*Magazine* published a cover story on the new research entitled “What if Fat Doesn’t Make You Fat?” Within months, supermarket shelves were restocked and restaurant menus rewritten to reflect the new nutritional wisdom. The blamelessness of steak restored, two of the most wholesome and uncontroversial foods known to man—bread and pasta—acquired a moral stain that promptly bankrupted dozens of bakeries and noodle firms and ruined an untold number of perfectly good meals.

So violent a change in a culture’s eating habits is surely the sign of a national eating disorder. Certainly it would never have happened in a culture in possession of deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating. But then, such a culture would not feel the need for its most august legislative body to ever deliberate the nation’s “dietary goals”—or, for that matter, to wage political battle every few years over the precise design of an official government graphic called the “food pyramid.” A country with a stable culture of food would not shell out millions for the quackery (or common sense) of a new diet book every January. It would not be susceptible to the pendulum swings of food scares or fads, to the apotheosis every few years of one newly discovered nutrient and the demonization of another. It would not be apt to confuse protein bars and food supplements with meals or breakfast cereals with medicines. It probably would not eat a fifth of its meals in cars or feed fully a third of its children at a fast-food outlet every day. And it surely would not be nearly so fat.

Nor would such a culture be shocked to discover that there are other countries, such as Italy and France, that decide their dinner questions on the basis of such quaint and unscientific criteria as pleasure and tradition, eat all manner of “unhealthy” foods, and, lo and behold, wind up actually healthier and happier in their eating than we are. We show our surprise at this by speaking of something called the “French paradox,” for how could a people who eat such demonstrably toxic substances as foie gras and triple crème cheese actually be slimmer and healthier than we are? Yet I wonder if it doesn’t make more sense to speak in terms of an American paradox—that is, a notably unhealthy people obsessed by the idea of eating healthily.