



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

By Michael Pollan

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

One of the *New York Times Book Review's* Ten Best Books of the Year

Winner of the James Beard Award

Author of #1 *New York Times* Bestsellers *In Defense of Food* and *Food Rules*

What should we have for dinner? Ten years ago, Michael Pollan confronted us with this seemingly simple question and, with *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, his brilliant and eye-opening exploration of our food choices, demonstrated that how we answer it today may determine not only our health but our survival as a species. In the years since, Pollan's revolutionary examination has changed the way Americans think about food. Bringing wide attention to the little-known but vitally important dimensions of food and agriculture in America, Pollan launched a national conversation about what we eat and the profound consequences that even the simplest everyday food choices have on both ourselves and the natural world. Ten years later, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* continues to transform the way Americans think about the politics, perils, and pleasures of eating.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

[Signature]Reviewed by *Pamela Kaufman* Pollan (*The Botany of Desire*) examines what he calls "our national eating disorder" (the Atkins craze, the precipitous rise in obesity) in this remarkably clearheaded book. It's 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 approaches his mission not as an activist but as a naturalist: "The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world." All food, he points out, originates with plants, animals and fungi. "[E]ven the deathless Twinkie is constructed out of... well, precisely *what* I don't know offhand, but ultimately some sort of formerly living creature, i.e., a *species*. We haven't yet begun to synthesize our foods from petroleum, at least not directly." Pollan's narrative strategy is simple: he traces four meals back to their ur-species. He starts with a McDonald's lunch, which he and his family gobble up in their car. Surprise: the origin of this meal is a cornfield in Iowa. Corn feeds the steer that turns into the burgers, becomes the oil that cooks the fries and the syrup that sweetens the shakes and the sodas, and makes up 13 of the 38 ingredients (yikes) in the Chicken McNuggets. Indeed, one of the many eye-openers in the book is the prevalence of corn in the American diet; of the 45,000 items in a supermarket, more than a quarter contain corn. Pollan meditates on the freakishly protean nature of the corn plant and looks at how the food industry has exploited it, to the detriment of everyone from farmers to fat-and-getting-fatter Americans. Besides Stephen King, few other writers have made a corn field seem so sinister. Later, Pollan prepares a dinner with items from Whole Foods, investigating the flaws in the world of "big organic"; cooks a meal with ingredients from a small, utopian Virginia farm; and assembles a feast from things he's foraged and hunted. This may sound earnest, but 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. He bounces around on an old International Harvester tractor, gets down on his belly to examine a pasture from a cow's-eye view, shoots a wild pig and otherwise throws himself into the making of his meals. I'm not convinced I'd want to go hunting with Pollan, but I'm sure I'd enjoy having dinner with him. Just as long as we could eat at a table, not in a Toyota. (Apr.) *Pamela Kaufman is executive editor at Food & Wine magazine.*

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

In *The Botany of Desire* (2001), about how people and plants coevolve, Michael Pollan teased greater issues from speciously small phenomena. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* exhibits this same gift; a Chicken McNugget, for example, illustrates our consumption of corn and, in turn, agribusiness's oil dependency. In a journey that takes us from an "organic" California chicken farm to Vermont, Pollan asks basic questions about the moral and ecological consequences of our food. Critics agree it's a wake-up call and, written in clear, informative prose, also entertaining. Most found Pollan's quest for his foraged meal the highlight, though the *Los Angeles Times* faulted Pollan's hypocritical method of "living off the land." Many also voiced a desire for a more concrete vision for the future. But if the book doesn't outline a diet plan, it's nonetheless a loud, convincing call for change.

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From [Booklist](#)

Humans were clearly designed to eat all manner of meats, vegetables, fruits, and grains. But, as Pollan points out, America's farmers have succeeded so wildly that today's fundamental agricultural issue has become how to deal sensibly with overproduction. The result of this surfeit of grain is behemoth corn processors, who

have commoditized the Aztecs' sacred grain and developed ways to separate corn into products wholly removed from its original kernels. This excess food and Americans' wealth and rapid-paced lifestyles now yield supersized portions of less-than-nutritious eatables. Pollan contrasts the technologically driven life on an Iowa corn farm's feedlots with the thriving organic farm movement supplying retailers such as Whole Foods. Pollan also addresses issues of vegetarianism and flesh eating, hunting for game, and foraging for mushrooms. Throughout, he takes care to consider all sides of issues, and he avoids jingoistic answers. Although much of this subject has been treated elsewhere, Pollan's easy writing style and unique approach freshen this contemporary debate. *Mark Knoblauch*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Darron Hiller:

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