

Title: Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals  
Author: Michael Pollan  
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Difficulty: (1 easy to 10 difficult) 2

The Omnivore's Dilemma is a book about the modern business of agriculture in the United States and its impact on the millions of people who raise, sell, and eat its products. It is of particular interest to those of us in western North Carolina committed to small farms, "organic" foods, and alternative eating lifestyles.

The author begins with a discussion of the biological peculiarities of corn, a plant which has established its biological niche by providing large amounts of energy in a small kernel. As such it has become the prime source of basic ingredients for the world-wide agro-business complex. Pollan surprises us with the statement that high energy corn is the basis for nearly all fast food products: corn-fed chicken and beef, corn-derived sugars and additives, and corn-based oils. He implies that these cheap, very high energy meals are greatly to blame for rampant obesity in the American population.

In another chapter, he talks about the agro-industrial feedlots for beef and chicken. He describes the unsanitary and destructive nature of these industrial farms, which destroy the land and require huge amounts of antibiotics and hormones to keep its prisoners healthy. He describes how huge amounts of energy are required to grow, process, and transport these industrial commodities to market.

A particularly shocking part of his description is how definitions of "organic" as agreed upon by the Department of Agriculture have subverted the public concept of organic. When the picture of "Rosie the chicken" is pasted on the front of a package of meat, she is shown in a pastoral barnyard setting. This is nothing at all like the reality of the hangar-like quarters where thousands of chickens crowd up against each other for the first five weeks of their lives and grow accustomed to the safety of the building. At that point, doors are opened and they are permitted to "range freely" for the last weeks of their lives. Naturally, they choose to stay in crowded

conditions...they're afraid of the outside. These chickens are then labeled free range simply because they had the option of doing so.

Pollan contrasts the conditions of industrial agriculture with the “grass-fed” ecologies of true organic farms. He describes how some small farms have rebelled against the accepted forms of agriculture by creating integrated farms: cattle, chickens, and plants supporting each other in a healthy environment. He gives examples of “open” farms, where the entire chain of food raising can be viewed by the customers, who assure themselves that the raising of food can be truly humane, healthy, and organic.

Perhaps the most interesting and delightful section of the book is spent on the secretive world of mushroom gathering. All over the United States fans of the many varieties of mushrooms go out to gather them from pine forests, stands of oak trees, and other forests. There are hundreds of kinds of edible mushrooms available in the wild which cannot be grown “in captivity.” Each mushroom has its own season—sometimes only a few days long—and its own preferred host or natural environment. The tastes of some of these mushrooms are extraordinary and the connoisseurs are secretive about when and where they find their favorite delicacies.

Pollan ends the book with a fabulous feast –local foods grown organically and gathered within hours of preparation. It is the shortest food chain, healthy, economical, organic, and tied to the land.

Michael Pollan has written a number of books which are highly rated by Amazon.com. This book is available in hardback, paperback, and wireless Kindle book format. I myself chose to listen to the CD audio book while driving on the long road to the organic supermarkets in Asheville.

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