

The Omnivore's Dilemma – A natural history of four meals

By: Michael Pollan

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Michael Pollan is now a well known writer, a contributing editor at The New York Times Magazine and a professor of journalism at Berkeley. In his fourth book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan explores three food chain systems and the farm to table journey of four meals. The first of the four meals is from a fast food restaurant; the second is made from ingredients produced by big-industry organics; the third is from an all-natural grass farm; and the fourth and last meal, the most perfect one according to Pollan, is one that he hunted, gathered and cooked himself, like our human ancestors would have. Pollan's premise is that many people lost their joie de vivre for food, and have given up trying to figure out what is good food for their body and the environment.

Pros

We found Pollan's colourful writing to be a fascinating blend of many disciplines especially agriculture and economics. His visual image of nature and food make words come to life, and wonderful to see in the minds' eye. Readers will be updated on the latest marketing terms such as organic, organic industrial and free range. Pollan exposes myths and reinforces the cultural heritage and food wisdom of past generations. We liked Pollan's message about the importance of understanding the seasonality of food and the need to know more about the origin of our food. Through the food and land connection he sheds light on a growing consumer trend from organic to local and fresh. After reading this book we have new questions to ask when we're buying food.

Cons

As the stories of the four meals are told, at times it seems the narrative goes off topic and it takes a long time to get to the point. Some insights may cause readers to fear mass food production, and leave them uncertain about what to do. The foods Pollan has chosen for his preferred meals are not readily available to all Canadians. As well, not all US farming practices and issues described in the book apply to Canadian agriculture. There is an element of fear mongering in this book that does not agree with our understanding of the Canadian food supply, and may undermine Canadians' confidence in eating a well balanced affordable diet. Although Pollan consulted many knowledgeable experts, and cited scientific studies, we noticed the glaring absence of any health professional reviewers such as dietitians, nutritionists or physicians.

Bottom line

The Omnivore's Dilemma is a powerful, well researched book and unlike any other we have read to date. It offers a unique perspective on food science that is not warm and fuzzy, and at times made us feel helpless. Pollan revealed the 'inconvenient truth' but hasn't provided any practical options for readers. Food lovers would enjoy reading the book for its visual, slow read. No reader will miss the importance of the food and land connections for our bodies and the environment and all will become more knowledgeable about what it takes to get food from the farm to our table. After all of this however, we were left wondering how to implement any practical changes to families' food habits. Pollan's sequel *In Defense of Food* may present some answers, and our review of this new book will be posted soon.