

## Clearing Up the Cloud of Confusion Around Food

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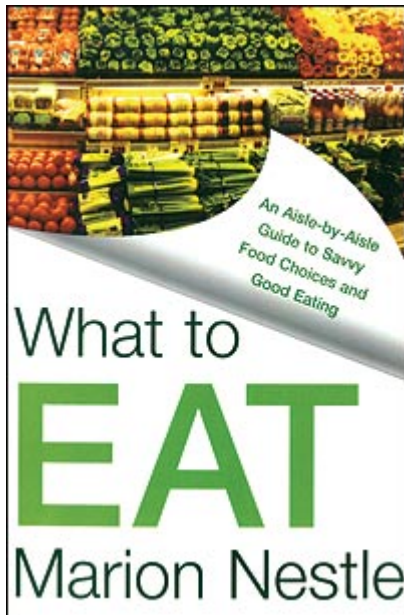
Owen Dugan

*Two new books help shoppers understand what's healthy (and enjoyable) and what's not*

These are bewildering times for food shoppers. Clouds of words—Atkins, "Supersize Me," obesity, organic, grass-fed, farm-raised, hydrogenated and on and on—have distanced the consumer from a real understanding of this thing that's essential to life and pleasure, but is too often associated with ill health and mortality. Clearly food is one thing about which we should know more rather than less. Two new books aim to help.

*Real Food* (Bloomsbury) codifies a green market, make-friends-with-a-farmer diet—which is perfectly natural since author Nina Planck grew up on a farm in Virginia and, in the late 1990s, helped create London green markets. She gets down to brass tacks defining "real food" right away: It is old (meaning foods that humans have been eating for a long time), and it is traditional (the old ways are the best ways). She spends the better part of the book going over the list of foods she eats, and enumerating the reasons they are better for you than foods she does not eat.

Personal anecdote is mixed with citations of people who agree or supplement the point. Butter and milk are good for you, but must come from a clean source and be processed as little as possible. Ditto lard. Forget about margarine—too new, too fake. And beef is okay, but must be grass-fed. This book is for people who are either following or curious about a back-to-the-farm diet. A warning though: There is a quasi-religious zeal running through the book, and it sometimes gets in the way of the information. Also, Planck's approach is personal. Exhibit A is her upbringing and her diet and her health, and all other evidence presented supports that.



Marion Nestle's *What to Eat* (North Point) takes the opposite approach. Reading this sizable book is like walking down the aisles of your grocery store with a celebrated nutritionist—Nestle is a published academic—at your side. Nestle goes to market and tells you what she found, what you should look for and avoid, and how to read a label, including how to read around the dubious health claims that are ubiquitous these days. Reading it actually makes you think differently in the store, makes you more engaged. For a vast array of foods, Nestle sifts through producers' claims, the hard science, where government regulators stand and finally how you can feel confident that you know what you're eating. Somehow through all this information she even appears to have a sense of humor, which is hard to imagine in such a book.

Planck and Nestle certainly agree on many of their recommendations, but they have written very different books. Planck is fairly rigid and focused on internal data. (She explains why high cocoa/low sugar chocolates are better for you by writing, "Sugar makes me fat and grumpy.") Nestle on the other hand is looser, but broader too. She writes things like, "I have a soft spot in my nutritionist's heart for frozen fruits and vegetables. They are vastly underrated. ... Freezing has practically no effect on the nutritional value of fresh produce."

As for their prescriptions, the main overlap is the idea that you should simply pay more attention to and become more invested in what you eat. They are both to be commended for helping to clear the air. The dearth of information about the environmental, health and social ramifications of food is just too much. "It's just food" is a common reaction. "I'll just eat what I like" is another. These two books show that it is never just food, but that with a little effort you can still take more from it than it takes from you.

*Real Food: What to Eat and Why*, by Nina Planck (Bloomsbury Publishing, 288 pages, \$24)

*What to Eat*, by Marion Nestle (North Point Press, 640 pages, \$30)