

## On Special at Your Local Supermarket: Moral Choices

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Books on Health

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What's for dinner?

People have probably been asking that question since our species developed articulate speech, and the proliferation of cookbooks, recipe columns, food magazines and Web sites is proof of the subject's enduring appeal.

Now two books are confronting the question in new ways, describing not just what Americans like to eat but also what we ought to eat, for the sake of body and soul. Each in its own way paints a disturbing picture of how food is produced, transported, marketed and consumed in the United States.

In "What to Eat," Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at [New York University](#), focuses on how much food we need, what kind, and how to find it. In "The Way We Eat," [Peter Singer](#), a bioethicist at [Princeton](#), and his co-author, Jim Mason, an animal rights activist, make the case that food choices are ethical choices.

Both books are organized around trips to the supermarket.

Dr. Nestle's readers walk with her from the produce section to the dairy aisle to meats, fish, frozen foods, baby foods and so on as she deciphers [nutrition](#) labels and tries to figure out what manufacturers mean by words like "natural." Along the way, she describes what nutrients the products contain (or don't contain) and debunks more than a few myths about food.

Dr. Singer and Mr. Mason organize their book around food shopping by three very different households: an Arkansas family eating "the Standard American Diet," much of it bought at Wal-Mart; a Connecticut family striving to eat only [organic food](#); and a Kansas family of vegans who eat nothing animal-based, not even cheese or eggs.

Both books end up in the same place on a number of issues.

Both advise eating organic food. Not because it's better for you — though it might be — but because it's better for the environment and far kinder to animals. And both pile up evidence that profit pressures in agribusiness are detrimental to society at large.

The examples the authors use to bolster their arguments are not for the weak of stomach. Dr. Singer's and Mr. Mason's gruesome description of industrial pig farming ought to turn any sentient reader away from anything but organic bacon. As Dr. Nestle puts it, "If you think too much about what is involved in the raising and killing of animals, you may find meat hard to eat."

In "The Way We Eat," the description of industrial chicken production actually comes with a warning that it may be "disturbing to some readers."

After describing life in an egg-laying battery, Dr. Nestle adds, "almost anything seems preferable to eating eggs produced in this fashion."

There will be those who will question the assertions in these books. For example, Dr. Singer has drawn criticism from people who say he is more interested in the rights of some animals than those of some people — severely deformed infants, for example. And Dr. Nestle's critics say she is wrong to emphasize government or corporate responsibility for food and should instead emphasize that individuals determine their own food destiny in their choices of what they eat.

And it is true that readers of these books will not learn much about the views of major players in the food industry. That's not for lack of trying, the authors say. Both books tell of telephone calls, letters, e-mail messages and other appeals for information or comment that went unanswered.

On the other hand, many of their arguments are beyond dispute. For example, any doubt that industrial pig farming can have disastrous environmental impacts was removed a few years ago, with the failure of a so-called lagoon holding vast amounts of manure from a North Carolina hog factory. The resulting pollution was widespread and long lasting.

And Dr. Nestle is far from alone in proclaiming, say, that the federal corn subsidies that produce vast supplies of cheap, sweet corn syrup have changed, for the worse, the diets of too many Americans.

Arguments based on market pressure also find little support in these books.

Dr. Singer and Mr. Mason dismiss the cost argument as insufficient to justify what they regard as chronic cruelty, much of it inflicted on highly intelligent creatures.

And Dr. Nestle maintains that, if anything, too much food is available in the United States — 3,900 calories per day per person, she writes, about twice as much as an average adult needs. Poor families are spending a far smaller proportion of their income on food today than they did a generation ago, she says.

And, while it is true that if a pig's tail is chopped off, another pig cannot gnaw it off, and that chickens whose beaks are seared off cannot peck one another to death, the authors say these steps are unnecessary when pigs are allowed to forage and nest naturally and chickens are not crammed into sheds where each has less than 80 square inches of space — an area smaller than a sheet of typing paper — as is typical in chicken production sheds.

It would not be fair to say that both books blame capitalism for bad food, animal cruelty and widespread human [obesity](#), but they come close.

Manufacturers look for ways to "add value" to food, so they can charge more for it, Dr. Nestle writes. This imperative, plus the corn syrup glut, help explain why Americans are so fat, she says, adding, "The way food is situated in today's society discourages healthful food choices."

And despite her critics, she argues that the government's unwillingness to do anything that might upset any segment of the food industry is shifting too much responsibility to consumers.

Rather than insisting that producers make sure that produce, eggs, meat and shellfish are safe, Dr. Nestle says, food regulators advise consumers to wash their produce, avoid eating anything with raw or even soft-cooked eggs, cook meat until it is well done and buy fish from "reliable suppliers," as if such suppliers were easy to identify.

Both books also point to one of capitalism's most intractable and widespread problems — costs that are important but do not show up in the balance sheet.

Organic food is more expensive than conventionally grown products, the authors concede, but that is because conventional growers do have to not pay for the damage done by pesticides in the soil, fertilizer runoff in the water or greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. If you add these "externalities" to the cost of a piglet and its feed, shelter and slaughter, conventionally produced bacon is no longer so cheap.

That is one reason why both books recommend that consumers seek out organic produce and meat from animals raised according to organic principles, which allow the animals to graze in a pasture and bar the use of [hormones](#) or [antibiotics](#) unless the animals are ill.

Though Dr. Nestle relates how some producers use terms like "natural" or "farm raised" to confuse shoppers, she says she is convinced that the "Certified Organic" seal can be trusted. You can tell, she says, by the constant attempts to chew at it by conventional growers and political appointees in the Department of Agriculture — all of them fought off, so far, by organic producers.

"If the organic standards require this level of vigilance, they must be doing something right," Dr. Nestle says.