

The Politics on Our Plates

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By Amy Bentley

Few would argue with the premise that food has taken on new importance in the United States in recent years. Cities are banning foie gras and considering whether restaurants should eliminate most trans fats from their menus, and schools are debating the merits of creating "junk-food-free zones" to encourage healthy eating. Experts declare the United States a "toxic food environment" and, taking cues from battles over smoking, seek to establish a "fat tax" on high-calorie, unnutritious foods. Many are wringing their hands over what they see as the extinction of family meals and the disappearance of home cooking.

Meanwhile, pricey new homes must include spacious kitchens complete with granite countertops, a stainless-steel Viking range, and a Sub-Zero refrigerator. McDonald's and Kraft are scrambling to create snacks and meals lower in fat and sugar, and trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup have assumed "evil" food status. As Wal-Mart begins to stock organic foods, Whole Foods — that bastion of virtuous food procurement — counters criticism by offering more local, seasonal items. Add to the mix the boom in culinary tourism — restaurants, food television, books, magazines, cooking classes, artisanal products, and the search for "authentic" cuisine of every sort — and the result is a surfeit of interest and anxiety about food. Americans cannot, and should not, avoid the subject.

The current interest in food has historical roots that reach back centuries, as Warren J. Belasco describes in his book *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food*. However, in the last 30 years or so in the United States, we've witnessed an emerging food "revolution" that has attempted to counter (or at least circumvent) the worst aspects of the industrialization of food. Those involved have worked to demonstrate the connection between good food and sustainable agricultural practices and to create better-tasting, higher-quality food for restaurants and consumption at home. Within the last decade, scholarly and political attention to food matters has deepened as the field of food studies has emerged, and as popular books by Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*) and Marion Nestle (*Food Politics* and *Safe Food*) exposed to an interested public the questionable practices of the food industry and the government's willingness to accommodate food-industry demands. It's easy to understand why books about food sell — food matters, and people are rarely neutral about the subject.

The books discussed here are concerned with food in all its broad sociocultural, environmental, and nutritional aspects, and all in one way or another are in dialogue with the current gestalt regarding food. What cultural currents underlie today's interest in and anxiety about food? First is the sheer amount of food that is available to Americans, with all the ramifications, positive and negative. The United States has become particularly adept at producing huge amounts of food, and we eat a lot more of it than we used to. The industrialization of agriculture, combined with government policies and politics encouraging the mass production of food, is a double-edged sword, of course. While it has facilitated better overall nutrition and health, it has also allowed excess and, ironically, poor health. While some critics wonder whether the uproar over the obesity

"epidemic" is fueled less by health concerns and more by superficial cosmetic and aesthetic responses, there are important health concerns that can't be dismissed, such as the startling rise in Type 2 diabetes among children.

Combine the sheer abundance with the "omnivore's dilemma" — the anxiety created by the multitude of food options — and it is easy to understand the well-fed human's predicament in the 21st century. Further adding to the anxiety is that the people of plenty now must reckon with the reality of finite resources: the water, oil, and arable land that have driven the modern agricultural revolution. There are also fears that industrial food culture has damaged the social fabric as well as the environment. The rise of fast food combined with other social and cultural phenomena (more single-parent and two-income families, cars built with cup holders and food trays) have led to changes in domestic food practices, which have in turn been viewed as having affected family life and even civil society. Whether this is accurate remains to be seen. While I think it is possible (as some do not), for example, to have a meaningful meal prepared from a microwave or around a table of fast food, I am persuaded by the opinion articulated by some of these authors that by its nature, quickly produced and quickly eaten food changes the qualitative experience of a meal.

Taken together, a cluster of themes emerges from these books. With various emphases, all address the ethical, health, environmental, and aesthetic issues as well as the anxieties about cultural and social reproduction that have been central to discussion about food production and consumption in the last decade. Setting the stage for all of this is *Meals to Come*, an intellectual history of world hunger and the debate over the ability to provide sufficient food for all. Belasco, a leading food-studies scholar and author of the highly regarded *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, examines in nuanced detail how each generation of Western philosophers, economists, politicians, and fiction writers has framed and evaluated that dilemma. Belasco divides the discourse into two main camps. On one side are the pessimists (Malthus and his intellectual offspring), who argue that there will never be enough food to feed us all — think of the film *Soylent Green*. On the other side are the optimists — Belasco terms them the "cornucopians" — who see science and human ingenuity as sufficient to meet each generation's challenges and shortcomings. Throw in the "egalitarians" (William Godwin, Frances Moore Lappé) — those who see the problem as less about quantity than about equal distribution between the haves and have-nots — and you have the basic theoretical positions that keep cropping up over the centuries. Belasco makes cogent, chilling observations about the culturally bound nature of definitions of "enough food." Invariably the discussions turn to meat, and we witness successive generations of European and American thinkers worrying about having enough meat, many fretting that the West will be reduced to "coolie" (grain-based) diets.

Speaking of meat and egalitarians, Peter Singer and Jim Mason's *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* is a thorough, clear examination and critique of the meat-laden American food system and diet. The acronym they choose — SAD, for the Standard American Diet (heavy on meat, other animal products, and refined grains, while light on fruits and vegetables) — gives some idea of their opinion of mainstream food and food habits. Both Singer and Mason are committed vegans, and they collaborated on an earlier book, *Animal Factories*. Their ultimate purpose in writing *The Way We Eat*, however, is

to expose the injustices (environmental, human, animal) of SAD rather than to necessarily persuade all Americans to eschew all animals and animal products.

The Way We Eat follows three American families, each of which has a different approach to food: one that eats SAD-ly; the "conscientious omnivore" family that tries to shop and eat ethically, though it finds doing so consistently difficult; and the vegan family whose more strict ethical orientation toward eating renders it, the authors argue, the most ethically successful. But the authors themselves admit that what constitutes "eating ethically" is open to debate. If San Franciscans, for example, are faced with the choice between buying a bag of California rice (local, though not sustainably grown in such an arid environment) and one from Thailand (indigenous to the tropical region but bearing high energy costs from shipping), the somewhat counterintuitive answer is to choose the Thai rice, which, according to the authors, comes out as the least worse choice in terms of natural resources used. Also, somewhat surprisingly, for Singer and Mason waste is waste — whether organic, animal, or vegetable and they give an approving nod to a committed vegetarian who chooses to eat leftover Thanksgiving turkey rather than throw it out. The wasting of food for Singer and Mason thus emerges as a central principle for defining "ethical eating." They note that 40 percent of the food produced in the United States is thrown away, half of it still edible. If we could eliminate waste, they argue, we could better feed people while creating less havoc for the environment.

In a similar vein, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, which has received the most attention of the books discussed here, also explores the ethics and anxieties of eating in the 21st century. Pollan traces from farm to fork four different meals, examining and evaluating the different food systems — "industrial" (represented by a meal from McDonald's); "industrial organic" (made from organic ingredients produced on a mass scale and procured from around the globe); "pastoral" (a regional, seasonal meal made largely from food acquired from Polyface Farm in Virginia); and "neo-Paleolithic" (made from ingredients Pollan himself hunted or foraged).

Through those journeys we meet memorable people, such as Joel Salatin, the Virginia farmer who helped Pollan understand the issues involved in food produced off the industrial grid. We look over Pollan's shoulder as he slaughters chickens, and take a seat with his family and friends at each of the meals. While Pollan is not the first to employ a meal as a rhetorical device for a broader discussion of food, this eminently readable book, framed largely by the Malthusian and egalitarian traditions, successfully integrates discussions of both science and culture, and of issues of production and consumption. It is also soulful to its core. Pollan observes, for example, "However we choose to feed ourselves, we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world." In the end, Pollan tips his hat to the "conscientious omnivore," the person who may not always make the most sustainable food choice but who is at least cognizant of and grappling with the complicated, often fraught provenance of the food we eat.

Attempting to assuage the omnivore's anxiety at the grocery store is Marion Nestle's *What to Eat*, an encyclopedic spin through the food aisles with an expert who knows her stuff. A nutritionist by training, with degrees in biology and public health, Nestle's delightfully straightforward approach does not belie her considerable expertise and

opinion on the subject of healthy (and unhealthy) food. Her previous books are provocative, tough-minded critiques of corporate food politics and misplaced government loyalties. Nestle's goal here is to bypass all the hype and veiled advertising to tell us what is what. Sweetened breakfast cereals? "Most are now so thoroughly processed and sugared and filled with additives that they might as well be cookies." The "Law of Portion Size"? "The more food in front of you, the more you will eat." No corner of the grocery store is left unexamined, it seems, and food items (produce, bread, baby food, meat) are discussed multidimensionally: as fuel, as a portion of the household budget, and as affecting and affected by labor issues, the environment, and the corporate bottom line, to name but a few. In addition to Nestle's critiques of the American food system are — thankfully — sound, helpful recommendations on how to avoid the supermarket land mines and get on with the business of healthy and enjoyable eating.

Finally, Bill Buford's *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* is a refreshing antidote to the earnestness of the others. *Heat* comes from a different but important genre of food book, the epicure's obsession with high-end consumption and unique gastronomic experience. Such forays into culinary tourism are significant contributors to the booming interest in food. While perhaps less concerned with high-minded aspects of food and eating, Buford describes another sort of "earnest eating" — the behind-the-scenes culture of the hot restaurant run by a big personality (Mario Batali).

Part Anthony Bourdain, part M.F.K. Fisher, *Heat* is Buford's experience as the novice who gradually acquires skill in the kitchen, and through his experience gains important insight into the genius of culinary mastery, admires kitchen professionals' dedication to their craft, and grapples with why good food is so important psychologically and culturally. While Buford paints hilarious portraits of dinner rushes and kitchen prep snafus, and reveals the (surprise, surprise) testosterone-charged environs of the three-star kitchen, he reveals a serious, reverential side as well. As manly kitchen tell-alls are not my favorite genre, I admittedly approached *Heat* with some reluctance. Yet I was both enlightened and entertained by Buford's honest approach to himself and his characters, and the book stayed with me long after I turned the last page. Perhaps even more viscerally than *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Heat* confirms the crucial link between history, culture, place, and food, and what happens to people and places where food traditions thrive. When people regard food not as medicine to be endured or as dangerous and fraught but as an integral part of life, to be savored with friends and family, they seem to be healthier and can celebrate their food without dissonance.

As these books make clear, food issues are a prominent part of the public discourse because for many Americans, careful consideration of the food one eats and serves one's family helps fill a spiritual void. As most of these authors suggest, only a return to more humane, more harmonious methods of growing, cooking, and eating will help restore a spiritual connection with the land, with our food, and with each other. This is not new, of course; thinkers from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry have been preaching these ideas for years, but as we have entered the 21st century, these notions have taken a qualitatively different turn. As Jackson Lears has demonstrated about mass production in general, a century ago, many Americans felt alienated by modernism and the

industrialization that severed the connection between producer and consumer; that alienation is still palpable in our relationship to mass-produced, industrial food.

Seeking local, seasonal food today, then, can be viewed as a version of the early 20th-century critique of mass society, in which a return to artisanal food functions as a bulwark against the ease and reproducibility of mass-produced, industrial goods — indeed, "pap" and "gruel" were frequently employed metaphors used by critics to describe the fare produced by the media and entertainment industries. For many Americans, preparing meals from scratch for one's family, using ingredients bought at a local farmer's market, signifies self-reliance, a sense of simplicity, and a voluntary disconnect from the fast pace of our postindustrial, digital era. It can also result in less wastefulness. Many producers and sellers of this alternative vision of food, including Whole Foods markets, capitalize on and cater to these kinds of desires.

Indeed, marketers have learned that while emphasizing the new food culture may not appeal to all (in fact, it may not appeal to the majority), it does appeal to a sizable, influential minority. Supermarkets have become willing to stock their produce section with organic fruits and vegetables, and even if they don't sell readily, they are attractive, powerful "loss leaders" that may draw customers into stores and bring them back again. Nonindustrial food (and industrial organic food, as Pollan terms it) is simply more readily available today — think of what's changed in grocery stores over the last decade or so — and that availability is shaping Americans' consumption and food habits. Though I may be completely off the mark, the current discourse over food may signal a modification of the traditional American emphasis on quantity over quality. Perhaps now the image of the overflowing cornucopia needs to have organic or artisanal labels attached to grapes, walnuts, and pineapples. Possibly we are modifying our utilitarian, Protestant outlook for one that is more thoughtful, more sensuous, and more flavorful and includes a more complex palate of tastes and flavors.

Weberian musings aside, what this spate of food-studies books represents is a new maturity in thinking, a genuine attempt to integrate complex issues linking aesthetics and ethics with health, the environment, family life, and social- and labor-justice issues, previously seen to have little in common. Further, the authors explicitly link issues of production with those of consumption, something not done as well since Sidney W. Mintz's superb 1985 *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. The books also demonstrate the convergence of the environmental movement and the "delicious revolution" — the two are on the same page, after all. Aldo Leopold meets Alice Waters, Rachel Carson meets M.F.K. Fisher. If these books fall short in any area, it is in addressing the difficult but crucial issue of getting all this healthy, sustainable (more expensive, less widely distributed) food to people of little means. Finally, these authors see little difference between science and poetry, between applying rational thought and romantic sentiment, to food problems and issues. For them, all knowledge, all emotion leads to the same point: a refashioned food system incorporating sustainable practices, cultural sensitivity, good nutrition, and taste. Such a system in the long run *is* the most practical and economically viable.

Not all people feel this way, of course; there are many who would unequivocally subscribe to straight cornucopian notions of food production, believing that scientific advancement and human ingenuity will preclude the need to alter our eating habits. But

as Marion Nestle concludes in *What to Eat*: "Willingly or not you participate in the environment of food choice. The choices you make about food are as much about the kind of world you want to live in as they are about what to have for dinner. Food choices are about your future and that of your children. They are about nothing less than democracy in action. I truly believe that one person can make a difference and that food is a great place to begin to make that difference. Yes, you should use personal responsibility — informed personal responsibility — to make food choices you believe in. Exercise your First Amendment rights and speak out. And enjoy your dinner."

Amy Bentley is an associate professor in the department of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University and author of Eating For Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity (University of Illinois Press, 1998). She is working on a cultural history of baby food.