

interview

with Michael Pollan

By Christina French



Naturalist Michael Pollan has spent twenty years writing about the places where the human and natural worlds intersect. His new book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, explores the ecology of eating to unveil why we consume what we consume in the twenty-first century. Pollan recently transplanted his family from five wooded acres in Connecticut to California, where he is Knight Professor of Journalism at UC-Berkeley.

On "Buy Local"

CF: Is the "buy local" movement a return to the old ways of pre-industrial farming and consumerism, or is this a totally new trend that we are experiencing with the recent increase in demand for fresh, local food?

MP: Well, I think it's both. In some ways it does resemble the way people used to shop when they went to farm stands or farmers' markets, or when even their supermarkets got all of their produce locally. But it's very different now too. First, [now] it's by choice. In the past, you had the "buy local" with not much else to choose from. And second, there are some real new wrinkles here. Something like the CSA model (Community Supported Agriculture) where you subscribe to a farm and get a weekly box of fresh produce – that didn't exist pre-industrialization of the food chain. So, I think it's really both. It's new and it's old and of course, the big difference is choice. People are doing it [buying local] for reasons that are very self-conscious, political, ecological and health-based reasons. And I don't think that was the case before.

On Nutrition

CF: What are the clear nutritional benefits of both seasonal and regional food choices?

MP: Old food from far away is just not as nutritious as fresh food. One of the primary benefits of local food is that it's freshly picked – picked at the peak of nutritional and taste quality. Food starts deteriorating as soon as you pick it and loses many nutrients along the way if it's shipped across the country. The other less-certain benefit is that local food tends to be grown in a more sustainable manner. That's not necessarily guaranteed, but most of these "mixed" local farms don't tend to use as many pesticides as the large monoculture farms that are growing the well-traveled food that is shipped across the country.

On Choosing Local

CF: What are the key reasons to "choose local" [with so many food options] that we can all understand easily and benefit from most?

MP: Well, I think the quality. You know, there's just no comparison. You can see the quality by looking at it [locally grown product]; you can see it by tasting it. And, when you go to a local farmers' market - it's just an enjoyable experience. It's a social experience, your children learn all sorts of things about food and culture, they meet people from the country ... and, there's political activity going on at farmers' markets. There's a recent study that shows that people have 10 times as many conversations at a farmers' market than they do at the supermarket. The farmers' market has become a new kind of public square and there's a real satisfaction to shopping there that goes beyond the mere exchange of food for money.

On Culinary and Agri-tourism

CF: What are the benefits of experiencing where your food comes from – seeing the family farm first hand?

MP: I think it's enormously important for children to learn, or remember, where their food came from. To learn that a carrot is not a glossy orange bullet that comes in a plastic bag, but is actually the root of a plant is important. Also, the contact between farmers and consumers is a two-way feedback loop and farmers get a lot of information about what consumers care about. One thing that they learn is that consumers prefer to not have food with chemicals all over them. I think often when consumers visit farms, it pushes farmers in a positive direction – to avoid chemical agriculture, to avoid being cruel to their animals or keeping them in bad conditions. So I think having the eyes of the consumer on the farm is very good all around. There's the learning experience – but it's happening on both sides.

I admit, I was nervous. My call to Michael Pollan to review ideas, opinions and discoveries that have made him the Elvis of food journalism and popular spokesperson for the Slow Food movement was not entered into lightly. But hey, food people are good people, and we all share a passion for life, quality and virtue that is universal, right. Right! From the first question on, my nervousness was quelled by his approachable character and friendly style. Read on, and come hear much more when Mr. Pollan is in Pittsburgh this March - see details on page 12.

CF: How can retailers and farmers work together to bring more locally-grown food directly into our larger retail supermarkets?

MP: I am not an industry consultant on this topic, but there are things retailers can do. Retailers have gotten accustomed to filling out a form and getting all their food from one distributor. It makes life simple and there's one bill for it... but, if they really want to participate in change, and improving what they have to offer, they are going to have to deal with lots of farmers, and they will have to understand the farmer's needs as well as their own. And that will mean a little bit more work on their part to have relationships with 30 suppliers of produce instead of one. It's also very useful when the retailer can understand the needs of the farmer. For example, farmers leaving farmers' markets often have a lot of produce that they need to get rid of. So, very clever produce buyers for local stores make deals with those farmers so they are getting really high quality produce for a good price. So, being open... having the back door of your store open to farmers at certain times of the day could be enormously helpful. It really is a matter of relationships.

CF: Carnegie Mellon University here in Pittsburgh is getting involved in the Slow Food movement. What would you say is our country's universities' role in changing the U.S. food supply both as an educator and producer of new intellectual capital that will help in this industry?

MP: Well, a very important idea of the Slow Food movement is to promote the study of gastronomy – which is an old French word that encompasses a great many aspects of food from connoisseurship to the ecology of food, the anthropology of food and how it's grown. There is a great deal of interest on campuses for gastronomy – even though that word isn't always used... but they talk about "food studies" – more the term of choice I guess. And I think that promoting this kind of work is very useful because the people who come out of those programs get involved in reforming the food system, or get involved in producing higher quality food because they are sensitized

to the issues of food quality or get involved in policy. So, I think that is a very important thing that universities can do. Also, the old agricultural extension universities have a special role to play. Their charge, which is paid for by the government, is to perform agricultural research and help farmers employ best practices. In general, agricultural extension in this country has been very closely aligned with industrial methods. It needn't be that way. The more that agricultural extension can explore things like organic agriculture, or permaculture, or integrated pest management the better. Only a fraction of the research dollars that go into developing new pesticides or pharmaceuticals for animals goes into developing systems that dispense of those things [in support of organic]. So, the universities could certainly help by moving in that direction too.

On the success of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

CF: Why now for *The Omnivore's Dilemma*? Why did you write it now and what constitutes the amazing response? What is the perfect storm here for the topic and for the public's passion for the topic of "what's for dinner" and learning more about where their food comes from?

MP: I decided to write the book because I've been writing about the interaction of nature and culture in our lives in many different areas. I've written about it in regards to architecture, gardening, drugs, and food is one of those places of intersection that I was very interested in and as a garden writer I got very interested in food and because I grow food in my own garden. But I had no idea when I started that there would be quite this much interest in the subject. And I



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