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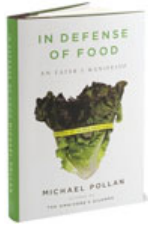
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# The Holy Church of Food

Preacher Pollan's no populist, but his politics are right.

By Laura Shapiro



Buy a hog? An entire hog? Cut it up and put the pieces in a freezer? I'm a fan of Michael Pollan's work, but he does have a tendency to hurtle himself into the stratosphere like an errant missile, then plummet back to earth and casually pick up where he left off. This time it's on Page 168 of his latest book, *In Defense of Food*: One minute he's carefully explaining the difference between "free-range" and "pastured" eggs, the next minute he's perched on his own private planet brandishing a grocery list that might as well be headed "carrots, magic." He acknowledges the possibility that some readers might not have room at home to install a hog-sized freezer, but that pretty much concludes the reality-based portion of this suggestion. Two pages later and he's off again, explaining why it's a good idea to go foraging in the wild for your salad greens. Pollan has been called an elitist for years, and his critics are bound to seize on the new book as fuel. But these bouts of the surreal don't reflect his politics, they reflect his religion—the holy, catholic, and apostolic church of food, where only martyrs and lost souls have to shop at Safeway.

There's always been a streak of the willfully impractical in Pollan's worldview. Like the other great, radical writers whose subject is the death grip of the food industry—Joan Gussow, Marion Nestle, Eric Schlosser—he's eloquent and persuasive; but come the revolution, he probably doesn't belong on the tactics-and-logistics committee. What he likes best is spinning long, mesmerizing tales from his immense research, as he did in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, the book that made him a star. It's a beautifully handled polemic against modern agribusiness until you get to the last chapter, the one that's supposed to bring it all home.

Pollan's way of doing this is to stage a kind of faith-based dinner party he calls "The Perfect Meal"—perfect because everything on the table will be made from ingredients grown, shot, or gathered near his home in the San Francisco Bay area, from the wild-boar pâté to the cherry galette. By the time he heads out to collect local yeast spores for the bread dough, you feel as though you're not even reading a book anymore but instead gazing stupefied at some sort of life-sized diorama in the Museum of Natural History ("Northern California, ca. A.D. 2000—Worshipping Plants and Animals").

The new book tries once again to bring it all home, and this time the results are more plausible. Pollan says he wrote *In Defense of Food* because readers who had just finished *The Omnivore's Dilemma* kept asking him, "OK, now what should I eat?" His answer rounds up many themes familiar from *Omnivore* but tucks them into a brisk little handbook on making right-minded food choices. He's still got a tin ear for the how-tos, but the whys are stirring enough to compensate. And Pollan, whose usual writing style is relaxed and discursive, turns out to have an unexpected gift for teaching the CliffsNotes version of his research. His master stroke is a ringing declaration of nutritional independence: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

It sounds like a grass-roots rebellion—literally—and that's pretty much what he has in mind. But to his critics on the left, the very notion of starting a food revolution by changing what you personally eat is wrong-headed, and Pollan is Exhibit A. Last summer the journal *Gastronomica* published a special issue on food politics in which Pollan's work was energetically trashed by scholars who can't abide what they call his emphasis on "individual dietary purity." In their view he's got a bully pulpit and should be using it to rally a mass movement against Big Food, instead of encouraging people to believe that having an organic soyburger for lunch puts them in the front ranks of political activism. "No suggestion is made that we ought to alter the structural

features of the food system, so that all might come to eat better," wrote Julie Guthman of the University of California at Santa Cruz. "Rather than making political choices, we pretend ... that our dietary choices will solve our personal and national problems," said E. Melanie Du Puis, also from Santa Cruz. Aaron Bobrow-Strain of Whitman College called Pollan "more and more a lifestyle guru than a muckraking campaigner."

I really think it's nonsense. He may not go about organizing food co-ops or marching against Monsanto, but Pollan constantly exhorts readers to bypass supermarkets and seek out the farmer. He encourages people to lobby for changes in the grossly destructive farm bill, and his relentless reporting on agribusiness is one of the most powerful weapons that exists in the whole arsenal of food politics. It's true that the new book trots out some trite advice (eat slowly, don't snack, a glass of wine is good for you). But there's no mistaking this for a wellness primer. Drawing on his own previous work and that of other researchers, he builds a case against the nutrition establishment that's intensely political, because it's about changing the way we think.

The science of nutrition, he argues, has little to do with food and has no business influencing our eating habits. Scientists don't yet understand precisely what makes healthful foods healthful; they haven't identified the full range of nutrients, and they have no idea whether packaged products "enriched" with factory-made vitamins and minerals are adequate substitutes for whole, natural foods. We even lack reliable data on exactly what Americans eat. In a delightful bit of participant journalism, Pollan tried his hand at filling out one of the dietary intake questionnaires that thousands of people contribute each year to major research projects. He couldn't do it. Nobody could, without making up most of the answers. How many half-cup servings of yams, okra, or broccoli did he eat in the last three months? Were they fried? In stick margarine? Tub margarine? Butter, lard, nonstick spray? And these are the studies regarded as the gold standard of nutrition research, the ones that regularly burst in the news with such headlines as "Low-Fat Diet Does Not Cut Health Risks."

Pollan's point is that we don't need the science in order to know what to eat. (He'd be more convincing on this issue if he hadn't fallen head over heels for omega-3 fatty acids, a nutrient he treats as lovingly as if it were a blonde half his age.) The experts he urges us to trust are the healthy people all over the world who still favor largely traditional diets and don't consume half their calories in sweeteners and other refined carbohydrates the way we do. Of course, they're learning our habits fast, thanks to the corporations eager to put a chicken nugget in every pot. When Pollan says, "Eat food," he means bring it back under your control. Accept no substitutes. Don't let the multinationals do the cooking.

His politics are fine. What's keeping him from being a genuine populist are his cultural antennae, which have a tendency to collapse without his noticing. Pollan is a believer, there's a pew with his name on it at Chez Panisse; and though he writes for the rest of us, he can't quite bring himself to take us seriously unless we can prove we've been born again. Early in his new book, he recalls the kind of food his mother served when he was growing up: beef stroganoff, oven-fried chicken, spaghetti, Chinese takeout. "Nowadays I don't eat any of that stuff," he says with relief, "and neither does my mother." But millions of us do (well, maybe not the stroganoff), and truth to tell, there's nothing wrong with any of those dishes if they're occasional rather than constant. Pollan won't have it. Home cooking derived from any era before Berkeley in the 1970s brings out the Cotton Mather in him. If you're "the kind of cook who starts with a can of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup," he warns, "all bets are off."

That's a whole lot of sinners he's dismissing, and I speak as someone who still lines a quiche pan with a Ritz cracker crust once in a while. Pollan knows better than anyone that a meal is far more than the sum of its parts. A dinner of tuna casserole nowadays isn't just about the chemicals in the canned soup. It's also about somebody's mother, and somebody's dog-eared copy of a Betty Crocker cookbook, and somebody's personal best in the kitchen. Pollan himself ate a canned-soup casserole not too long ago; has he forgotten? It happened at dinner on the idyllic, radically progressive organic farm run by the Salatin family, which he describes in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. "Everything we ate had been grown on the farm, with the exception of the cream of mushroom soup that tied together Teresa's tasty casserole," he writes. I wish I'd been there to see if the devil made him ask for seconds.

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