

Agriculture & Food

Farming, Food Fantasies and Recombinant Cuisine

By Astrid Webster

If you haven't seen Food, Inc and plan to eat again in the foreseeable future, you probably should. You just might not want to, however; eat again, that is. It's the perfect leadup for a New Year's resolution to lose weight. It could be called the Think Before You Eat Diet.

If you want to slow the information about what America eats down a bit, reading Michael Pollan's books is a good alternative. In Omnivore's Dilemma, Pollan takes the reader on a literary tour of food from the nation's farms to our tables. To say that it's an unappetizing trip, save for the chapter on Polyface Farm, would be an understatement. Think school cafeteria food with none of the culinary niceties.

Pollan's second book, In Defense of Food, takes on food science as it is practiced under the four horsemen of a capitalist orgy: mass production, corporate wealth at the expense of personal health, megamedia conglomerates and people who are too busy or distracted by said media to notice what they are putting into their mouths. If we weren't so busy buying misinformation, our savings accounts would be growing exponentially since there is so little



in the US marketplace that truly enhances our lives. Most of it is simply another layer of distraction that keeps us from noticing how the meaning of our lives is slipping away.

Lierre Keith's *Vegetarian Myth* is the capstone of understanding how far afield we have gone from understanding what we need to eat so we can simultaneously nourish our soil and our bodies. Ever since people began to consciously cultivate crops, we have tried to wrest more food than the world provides naturally. This forcing, as Keith calls it, has led to an increasing depletion of the Earth's soil and consequent capacity to feed her growing masses. The solution has been to slice every soy bean, every corn kernel and grain of wheat into so many slices or fractions that what we see is not nearly what we think we are getting. If you are of a mind that the emperor has no clothes, you might consider that what he is bringing to your plate is equally denuded.

News from the FDA that our palettes are increasingly seduced by yummys that are empty calories or are downright harmful only breaks the surface



of the media's glossy news once in a while as it recently did with the warnings against transfats. Sherry Rogers, MD has played Paul Revere to our nutrition and medical care for some time but few have ever heard of her. Think Andrew Weil, Jonathan Wright and Alan Gaby all rolled into one, so prolific a writer is she.

To get an idea of her drift, consider titles like the Cholesterol Hoax, the Blood Pressure Hoax and Is Your Cardiologist Killing You. She is known throughout the world as a longevity and environmental health expert but you have to hunt for her books or go to her own publisher to get them. She can also save your life, just as carefully reading the books listed above can.

Having steeped myself in topics such as the ones listed above and the ones I have been writing about here for the past year, I find myself

feeling that we need a transition town mentality about the food we eat. If we need it to nourish us, and we do, we have to mount an effort similar to the victory gardens so many of our parents grew during World War II. Indeed, there is a WWII going on right now for our minds, our bodies and the future we should be leaving to our children. That reality is nowhere in sight unless we change how embedded our food is in our fuel cycle.

We cannot continue to replace all that is natural in the plants we eat and in the animals who eat them and are in turn eaten by us with synthetically produced food look-a-likes and expect a population that is capable of demanding and supporting a real democracy. Most of us wouldn't have a clue where to start but the answer is right under our noses. Toby Hemmenway can tell you what to do with the soil you find there in his book,

Gaia's Garden. It is a delightful irony that the garden on the cover of his first edition is smack in the middle of Los Alamos. Eden in the heart of darkness, you might say. The newly released film *Dirt* also tells the truth about what lies underfoot. Food is central to the growing circle of violence that surrounds us; it can shrink once again if we treat our mother Earth as we should and let her provide food for us in a way that is natural rather than forced, tended by creatures that do most of the gardening for us if we render the respect that is their due.

Food, Inc. shows the violence embedded in the way food is brought to our tables. The violence that takes food from the tables of 'developing' nations is a topic for another day.

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'A follow-up to the UK's major trial of genetically modified crops, the Farm Scale Evaluations, finds that impacts on wildlife can persist for two years. The original trial found that spring GM rape and sugar beet were harsher than their conventional equivalents in the short term, while GM maize was better.

The new study shows the same pattern at two years for rape and maize'--BBC Report by Richard Black
Environment / BBC
News website

Eco Etiquette: How Can I Avoid Genetically Modified Foods?

*by Jennifer Grayson
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This week's headline-grabbing news that agriculture giant Monsanto's genetically modified corn was found to cause organ failure in rats is sure to send panicked shoppers into an anti-frankenfood frenzy. The good news is that this is precisely the kind of damning study (GM corn + animals = death) that will help bring to light the potentially catastrophic consequences of scientifically altered crops. The bad news is that even those who see that light will have a difficult time completely boycotting genetically modified organisms, or GMOs as they've come to be known.

That's because GMOs aren't just limited to the foods we eat; they're also in the

clothes we wear (cotton is one of the most prevalent GMO crops) and in the everyday household products we use. Those who buy giant jugs of distilled white vinegar to make DIY eco-friendly cleaning products might be interested to know that their vinegar may, in fact, be distilled from GMO corn. I say may, because if you live in the United States, there's no proof that the products you buy or the food you serve your children hasn't been genetically tampered with. While the EU, Japan, China, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have labeling laws for GMO foods, there are no such requirements in the US, despite the fact that a 2008 CBS News poll found that an overwhelming 87 percent of Americans would like GMO foods to be labeled.

As usual, lawmakers are light-years behind

the American consumer. And with a GM crop pioneer now firmly planted in the Obama administration as director of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, I'm not holding my breath for GMO crops to be restricted in the US anytime soon. Here's how you can take charge in the meantime:

Buy organic. Under USDA guidelines, organic foods must be produced without bioengineering. Keep in mind, however, that for multi-ingredient or processed organic foods (counterintuitive though that may sound), the label organic means only that the product is at least 95 percent organic. Translation: While the tomatoes in that "organic" spaghetti sauce may, indeed, be organic, the soybean oil it contains may be from GMO crops. Play it safe by looking for products that are labeled 100 percent organic, and stick to unprocessed foods whenever possible.

If you can't afford to buy everything organic, at least make sure that the animal products you purchase -- meat, dairy, eggs -- are. With conventional beef, for instance, you can be pretty sure that mountains of Roundup Ready corn were fed to those cows. That conventional zucchini? Not as looming a threat, at least where GMOs are concerned.

Beware the SCCC. No, it's not some new government agency (though maybe it should be). That stands for soy, cotton, canola, and corn, which are among the most common GMO crops. The statistics are startling: 91 percent of soy, 87 percent of cotton, 75 percent of canola, and 73 percent of corn crops grown in the US are GMO, according to the USDA. So unless the label specifically says organic, you can pretty much bet that any food or product you buy that contains any of the big four have been genetically changed. We're not just talking tofu and

tortilla chips, either: It's the sheets on your bed, those potato chips fried in cottonseed oil, and the aspartame in your Diet Coke (made using a fermentation process that involves soy and corn).

Avoid processed, packaged foods. Thanks to farming subsidies that have produced unimaginable surpluses of cheap (mostly GMO) corn, we now have dozens of corn-based ingredients served up to us in increasingly creative ways by the processed food industry. As Michael Pollan points out in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, "Corn is in the coffee whitener and Cheez Whiz, the frozen yogurt and TV dinner, the canned fruit and ketchup and candies, the soups and snacks and cake mixes...there are some 45,000 items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn." Bottom line: If you're concerned about GMOs, don't eat anything with an advertising budget.

Check out the Non-GMO Shopping Guide. The site just launched last month, and offers more tips on how to avoid GMOs. The guide also includes lists of common name-brand foods that may contain them, as well as ones that are GMO-free.

Finally, the most important thing you can do, beyond voting with your dollars: Call your Congressperson to say that you want to see mandatory GMO labeling laws. If the jury is still out as to whether GMOs cause organ failure, then we shouldn't have to play this guessing game every time we go to the supermarket.

Send all your eco-inquiries to Jennifer Grayson at eco.etiquette@gmail.com.