

Michael Pollan's Misguided Food Nostalgia

Louise O. Fresco

Pollan's popular food books send the wrong message on hunger and progress, says Louise Fresco.

Michael Pollan is the sympathetic but misleading guru of all those who would like to save the world by eating well. In his best-selling "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and the follow-up "In Defense of Food," he criticizes large-scale, fossil-fuel-based agriculture, the food industry and the nutrition science that collectively have led us to stray from the path of our great-grandmothers. We eat the wrong things, become obese and destroy the environment. Many have embraced his mantra, so simply stated in his best-selling book "In Defense of Food": "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." It seems so commonsensical that one could not disagree.

But is it right to abandon's skepticism when it comes to Pollan?

Eat food. What else, would you ask? Pollan seems to suggest that people eat things that do not qualify as food. Of course, he means "processed" foods and snacks, which he abhors. There are indeed some horrible concoctions of sugar and fat on the market, but not all food processing is bad or deprives food of its nutrition. On the contrary. Modern food processing has enormously improved the quality and the safety of our food: We benefit from fewer contaminations, fewer bacteriological infections, better taste, better nutritional quality, and so on. Today's canned and frozen foods are infinitely healthier than in the past; canned tomatoes are even to be preferred, because nutrients are more easily absorbed in cooked tomatoes. Processing food also means that it can be shipped around the world, offering poor countries an opportunity to be food exporters, and poor farmers an income -- and making everybody's diet more diverse than ever before in human history. Yes, this comes at a cost, and we should remain conscious of the fact that eating strawberries in the middle of the winter is exceptional and should be treated as a special event, not as a matter of course.

Not too much. This depends. Moderation is healthy when an individual's diet is balanced. But if it is not, moderation can lead to nutritional disorders. Children on a moderate diet of carbohydrates (bread, tortillas or rice) will not become overweight but may lack some of the minerals and vitamins for healthy development.

Pollan suggests that "more is less," a slogan that may be adequate for the U.S., but one that ignores the realities in the developing world. Over 900 million do not have enough to eat and about double that number suffer from chronic micronutrient shortages. It is essential to make North Americans and Europeans understand that food production worldwide must increase dramatically to feed an additional 2.5 to 3 billion people (depending on projections) by 2050 and to allow those who do not eat enough today, to catch up. There is only one way to produce food for the future: to increase the productivity of land, labor and water (more crop per drop) by using the best available modern technology. Not by reverting to traditional, labor- and time-consuming methods that yield too little. There are just not enough people around to work the land, not in North America, not elsewhere. And unfortunately, young people, everywhere, do not take pride in being farmers anymore.

Mostly plants. Indeed, most people know that eating plants is less taxing to the environment than eating meat. But it is not that simple. In many parts of the world, such as Mongolia or the Argentine Pampas, the land is mainly suitable for grazing, so there is no alternative to producing meat. Also, meat is often a byproduct of milk production: no milk without male calves who go on to be slaughtered. Meat also provides protein and iron in a form that is more easily absorbed by humans and is a unique source of vitamin B12. A diet with milk products and fish but no meat can be perfectly healthy. But children benefit tremendously from small quantities of meat. And remember, fish is as problematic as meat when it comes to its effects on the environment. Wild fish stocks are being depleted at alarming speeds and fish farming is a major source of chemical and genetic pollution.

Michael Pollan deserves credit for having put food on the political agenda, where it belongs. His intentions are no doubt honest, although his scientific statements are often simplistic. For example, he asserts that we have replaced sun-based agriculture with fossil-fuel-based agriculture. But, of course, all agriculture is sun-based.

He sometimes errs on the side of demagogy. Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. My great-grandmothers probably wouldn't have recognized kiwi, tofu, broccoli or tilapia. And if you happen to be Chinese, your great-grandmother did not know bread or pizza, neither did Indian great-grandmothers know barbecue. We should cherish the fact that today's cuisine is a wonderful mixture of local tradition and ethnic importation, scientific innovation and widespread availability of food from all over the world. Our great-grandmothers cooked food for hours, losing many of the nutrients; we steam it, or put it in a microwave, or grill it in a fraction of the time.

Our collective food story is not a tale of decline, but of remarkable improvements. We are much healthier, not sicker. We are eating much better than our great-grandmothers. We are infinitely better at controlling the risks of food production. The proof lies in our increased life expectancies and the doubling of world population in the last 50 years. Of course, we still make mistakes, but we are learning. Large-scale pollution through agrochemicals is becoming a thing of the past. Rates of deforestation, too, are finally coming down. Our great-grandmothers would be delighted to know how much progress we have made and how easy it is to achieve a varied diet. They would be excited about the future, so much less tedious than their lives, and they would not recognize Pollan's misguided nostalgia.

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