

The High Price of Cheap Food over lunch with Michael Pollan

HELEN C. WAGENVOORD May 2 2004 San Francisco Chronicle

If you're reading this on a fair Sunday, journalist Michael Pollan is probably in his garden. That's where he harvests a lot of his ideas for his award-winning books and articles on what's for dinner and how it got to our plate.

Orville Schell, dean of the UC Berkeley School of Journalism, persuaded Pollan, former editor of Harper's magazine and contributing editor to the New York Times Magazine, to move his family from their Connecticut farm to Berkeley to accept a newly endowed chair to teach science and technology journalism. Schell raves about Pollan's "food chain" journalism, crediting him with creating "a whole world of reporting that didn't exist before: covering the world of agriculture from womb to tomb."

Pollan, 49, is probably best known for his most recent, best-selling book, "The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World," which profiles four plants that have played starring roles in human history: the apple, potato, tulip and marijuana. He exposes folk hero Johnny Appleseed as an importer of cheap hard cider to the weary settlers of the American frontier. He divulges that astronomer Carl Sagan did some of his best thinking while stoned. His book shows how these plants have played human sensibilities like a violin, seducing us into filling our fields and gardens with their species.

I met Pollan for lunch at Alice Waters' Chez Panisse restaurant. Chez Panisse serves up gourmet dishes made from local and organic foods and serves as a rebuttal to industrial agriculture in our fast-food nation. It seemed like the right place to discuss our country's mealpolitik.

Despite the fact that Pollan just moved to the Bay Area in August, when we meet at the restaurant in January, I feel a little like we've just walked into his neighborhood diner. "Hi, Michael," "Hey, Michael," "Hey, I just borrowed your book from the library" is the Doppler of greetings he receives from the waitstaff as I follow his tall, lean form to our corner table at the back of the restaurant.

Obviously, he's been here before -- his 11-year-old son learned his favorite way to fry Yukon Gold potatoes from Waters (boil and peel them, then fry them in olive oil) -- and the restaurant staff clearly likes him. Pollan's friendly. He grins broadly when he laughs. Dressed in a navy blue sweater, jeans, black tennis shoes, wearing dark-framed, round glasses and schlepping a red backpack, he looks like an older grad student rather than a famous writer whose articles have been making trouble for corporate food conglomerates.

One of Pollan's signature articles is "Power Steer" (New York Times Magazine, March 31, 2002), in which he buys a steer and details its life from calthood to slaughter. He writes, typically, from the vantage point of a curious and open-minded John Q. Public. His interest in covering the beef industry was sparked by a drive past the choking stench and endless black sea of cows packed into Harris Ranch's feedlot off Highway 5. He was also morbidly fascinated by the "biological insanity" of the industry's practice of feeding cows to cows. As a result of his chronicling of a cow's journey from birth to steak, the market for grass-fed beef grew, Pollan was a key contact for journalists covering the beef industry in the wake of the recent mad cow flap, and his son lost his appetite for fast-food hamburgers.

Andrew Kimbrell, who directs the Center for Food Safety, an advocacy organization that watchdogs food standards and practices, said Pollan's article "Playing God in the Garden" (New

York Times Magazine, Oct. 10, 1998), in which Pollan plants Monsanto's genetically modified potatoes in his garden and digs into the controversies surrounding genetically modified crop plants, "brought more attention to the issue of genetically modified foods than any other article. We were suddenly contacted by members of Congress and philanthropists who had been absent on the issue."

Monsanto paid attention, too. Philip Angell, the director of corporate communications, issued a company statement saying Pollan's article lacked "a degree of objectivity, a commitment to the facts, and a willingness to consider the full range of viewpoints" and failed to cite scientists, agricultural experts or articles, which the company had provided Pollan, on the benefits of agricultural biotechnology.

When I ask him about Monsanto's statement (which the company has kept posted on its Web site for several years), Pollan has to be reminded of the charges against him. Then he starts remembering. The letter was, if anything, a relief to Pollan. "I thought, phew, I didn't get any of the facts wrong. There really wasn't any substantive criticism of my article." He suggests the letter may have been written by Angell to keep his job after he provided Pollan with the following quote for his article: "Monsanto should not have to vouchsafe the safety of biotech food. Our interest is in selling as much of it as possible."

Pollan's New York City-based agent was horrified by the prospect of Pollan's move to California from the East Coast, says Schell, who uses the same agent. Schell explains that New York's literati think a move to California places a writer at great risk of drowning in a hot tub or becoming soft and strange and taking up hobbies like yoga.

Pollan initially turned down Schell's job offer for different reasons (he was pretty happy in Connecticut), but upon closer scrutiny, he "decided this could be an interesting adventure. I saw some resonance between what I was doing, the issues I was focusing on and this part of the world." So he moved his family from their farm in rural Connecticut to a rambling house with a large kitchen they've rented in the Elmwood district. He has planted vegetables and herbs in the garden and is having to retrain himself as a West Coast gardener, a process he finds "daunting, weird and perverse."

After living in the country, his family enjoys being able to walk to everything. "I think I'm one of the few people who moved to California and started using his car less." His 11-year-old son recently exclaimed, "Dad, I love being able to walk around the block and actually see something." Pollan explains that in their home in Connecticut, "we could see a lot but it was mostly oak trees." His wife still spends her time looking at trees. She is Judith Belzer, a landscape artist he met when they were both at Bennington College in the late 1970s. She has been spending time with the coast live oaks. Through her paintings, Pollan has noticed "the quality of light is different here. The bark on the trees is so thin, perhaps because of the less brutal climate, it looks like skin. It makes the branches and trees look more animate. "

He and his wife edit each others' work: He will look at her canvases and comment on the parts that work; she in turn reads his drafts and gives him important feedback from the vantage point of "a true reader, that increasingly rare person who reads simply for the sheer pleasure and not because she's in the business."

Since the move, his family's grocery bills have gone up because it's now much easier to find things like organic non-homogenized milk and grass-fed beef, the type of thing he could only get from farmers when he lived in Connecticut. "It's a very seductive lifestyle here. In rural Connecticut, you had to work harder to find interesting people, interesting places to exercise, and interesting food. Here it's all just handed to you."

To start his lunch, he orders the Cannard Farm chicory salad with Dungeness crab, because "everything you get from Cannard Farm is great." Cannard farm, he explains, doesn't look like a typical farm; it is more "weedy. " Mingling weeds with crops adds vitality to the system, the farmer believes. Pollan's not too quick to scoff at this unconventional practice. In his first, award-winning book "Second Nature: A Gardener's Education," Pollan writes, "The successful gardener, I've found, approaches science and folk wisdom, even magic, with like amounts of skepticism and curiosity. If it works, then it's 'true'. Good gardeners tend to be flat-out pragmatists not particularly impressed with science."

Alice Waters appears at our table, her smooth, luminous face looking younger than her nearly 60 years. She has said on more than one occasion, without apparent jest, that she wants Pollan to run for president, with Eric Schlosser, author of "Fast Food Nation," as his running mate. Pollan demurs and jokes that neither of them have enough hair. As Waters and Pollan start talking about food and politics, it's clear that it's been an ongoing conversation. Then, Waters invites us down to sample some grass-fed beef with her staff after lunch.

Waters was so moved by a talk Pollan gave about grass-fed beef over a year ago that she pulled corn-fed beef from her menu. She was troubled to learn that feeding a cow corn, rather than the grass it has evolved to eat, transforms it from a solar-powered to a fossil-fueled animal. Corn requires more nitrogen fertilizer (made from natural gas) and pesticides (made from petroleum) than any other food crop. Furthermore, she learned, as he wrote in "Power Steer": "... many of the health problems associated with eating beef are really problems with cornfed beef," as he found out that the "meat of grass-fed livestock not only had substantially less fat than grain-fed meat but that the type of fats found in grass-fed meat were much healthier."

Making the switch, though, has not been easy for the restaurant. Grass-fed beef is more expensive, its quality inconsistent and the now-small industry faces challenges with distribution. So Waters is having a hard time finding beef that will make the cut. Pollan explains, "It's an issue where she wants to do the right thing, but with her commitment to quality it's complicated to do the right thing."

After lunch, we head downstairs, where the air is heavy and warm with the scent of platters of flank, skirt and ribeye steaks and spareribs. A table brims with a dozen plates of glistening, medium-rare strips of beef.

Since Pollan is full after the pizza he had after his salad, he playfully asks Waters for a spittoon "like you have at a wine tasting." She buzzes into the kitchen and returns to heft a large spittoon onto the table. He assures her he was just joking, but she's not laughing. "You may need it with some of these samples," she says grimly, as she also sets down glasses of Claret "for washing it down."

He turns to the plates with the vigor and confidence of a surgeon, cutting off chunks while staff at the next table look on and do post-mortems on which, if any, of the beef samples will make it to the menu. Pollan singles out his favorite samples and explains why he enjoys grass-fed beef. "I feel so much lighter after a meal of grass-fed beef compared with the 'assault' you experience with corn-fed beef. I also enjoy cooking my meat rare, and with grass-fed beef I can do that without worrying about the health risks."

The market barriers for grass-fed beef and locally grown organic foods are similar. Especially without the boost of subsidies, such food is simply more expensive. Proponents for industrial agriculture have glommed onto this issue, charging that organic foods and grass-fed beef are overpriced, overrated foodstuffs available only to an economic elite. Industrial agriculture and factory farming, on the other hand, they argue, provide America with cheap and widely available food.

One of the loudest defenders of this point is the Center for Consumer Freedom, which scoffs at what they characterize as Pollan's opposition to cheap food. The organization is funded by large food corporations, including Monsanto and Tyson. Pollan says the group was originally established to defend the tobacco industry but now rallies to the defense of food corporations. Regardless of the issue, their tactic is to attack the messenger. There are three articles on CCF's Web site slamming Pollan's journalistic credibility. A recent headline charged: "New York Times Magazine Writer Allies With Radical Food Activists," referring to a panel Pollan staged at UC Berkeley titled "The Politics of Obesity: Confronting Our National Eating Disorder," which examined the factors fattening the country, including cheaper prices for processed foods high in fat and sugar.

"The industrial food chain does produce food more cheaply, in terms of the price you pay at McDonald's or the supermarket," replies Pollan, "but the real cost of cheap food is not reflected in those prices. You're paying for it in your tax dollars because you're giving farmers \$20 billion a year in subsidies. You're paying for it in public health costs. These subsidies make unhealthy food cheaper than healthy food, and so our country is facing an obesity epidemic. The antibiotics you need for your son's illness don't work anymore because we've squandered them all on farm animals. We can't take fish from the Gulf of Mexico because of the nitrogen runoff from agricultural fertilizers. The people of Des Moines, Iowa, have to drink bottled water in the summer because their water is poisoned. Those are all costs. The phrase I use is 'the high cost of cheap food.' "

He doesn't really buy the elitism argument, either. "This is a point Eric Schlosser makes: A great many social movements begin with the elite. Just because a movement is elitist, we shouldn't dismiss it. The abolition and women's suffrage movements were 'elitist.' The elite have more time and freedom to deal with some of these issues. If a movement stays elitist, though, that's a problem."

In "Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex" (New York Times, May 13, 2001), Pollan examines the ingredients in an organic TV dinner while standing in the frozen food aisle of his grocery store, and then traces the evolution of the organic food industry from a fringe movement yielding dirt-caked fruits and vegetables sold by a few impassioned hippies to a widely available, often processed foodstuff produced by large corporations and sold by major grocery chains.

In the article, he quotes one of the pioneering organic farmers of the '70s, who is now a vice president at General Mills, Gene Kahn. Kahn explains his controversial career shift: "This is just lunch for most people. Just lunch. We can call it sacred, we can talk about communion but it's just lunch, " and, "unless organic food 'scales up' it will never be anything more than yuppie food." Still, Pollan tends to side with the organic ideologues who think industrial agriculture and processed foods are counter to the true spirit of organic.

Pollan doesn't quite resolve how to bring more of this slow food to a fast food nation that is only speeding up, fueled by corporate powers of production and distribution. He does point out the power of the individual consumer and the importance of being vigilant about legislative decisions in Washington. It's also important to remember that this is journalism Pollan is practicing. Just journalism. Pollan leaves it to the reader to decide what should be done, although he will explain, with all the facts registered, that he's personally decided to favor locally produced, organic whole foods.

When I ask Waters why she thinks Pollan's writing is so effective, she pauses and chooses her words with the same care with which she chooses her produce: "He has a voice that is so unpretentious and so informed. Sometimes these discussions about food get too intellectual or too 'alternative.' But he has a voice that speaks to the mainstream and it brings along the intellectuals as well. It's his sense of humor and how he brings the reader along when he is exploring an issue."

He brings the reader along, in part, by using creative, hands-on approaches to research. In addition to buying his own beef calf to better understand factory farming, and planting a few genetically modified potatoes to compare them with his own bug-bitten spuds, he's planted poppies and spent several stress-filled months exploring whether he could be arrested for growing opium-producing poppies for ornamental purposes. He test-drove vegetarianism while he wrote an article about it.

But he didn't become a vegetarian. Pollan wears a leather jacket. He had braised shank of lamb for dinner the other night and he freely admits that he enjoys eating meat. "I looked at the environmental issues and I realized vegetarianism wasn't necessarily the answer. If we were all vegetarian, it would still require a huge industrial food system because there are parts of the country where you can't grow fruits and vegetables. For example, there are certain landscapes, like the rocky landscapes of New England, where animals are the best way to get protein from the land, not row crops. If you really want to conform food chain to place, meat has to be a part of it. We should be eating less meat, especially with 70 percent of our country's grain going to feed animals. Yes, we'd be better off with more vegetarians, but I'm not going to be one of them." At the end of the day, and at the end of most of his articles, Pollan doesn't believe in absolutist approaches. "We don't need one kind of food chain; we need 10. Monoculture is as much of a mental problem as an agricultural one."

His interest in the connections between food and the garden date back to childhood. In "Second Nature," he recounts growing up in a Long Island suburb, the only Jewish family in a Catholic neighborhood, with a father who refused to mow the front lawn, much to the chagrin of the manicured neighborhood (another seminal Pollan article is titled "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns" published in the New York Times Magazine, May 28, 1989, in which he advocates replacing lawns with gardens). He was also influenced by his Russian immigrant grandfather, who started out selling produce from a horse cart but eventually made his fortunes in produce and then real estate. His grandfather "planted exclusively those varieties sold by the supermarket chains ... he preferred a (theoretically) marketable crop to a tasty one."

The editor at the New York Times Magazine, whom Pollan describes as "a great casting director" recognized how much Pollan's gift for making connections enriched his coverage and encouraged him to focus on food issues. Pollan observes, "The more I write about food, the more I'm surprised by where I'm taken. Writing about beef took me to corn, which took me to the Gulf of Mexico, which has become so polluted from nitrogen runoff from fertilizers, to the Persian Gulf, where we go to defend this oil supply that is the real feedstock of our agriculture. Twenty percent of our fossil-fuel consumption goes to agriculture; the average item of food travels 1,500 miles before it gets to your plate. Our food economy depends on a cheap energy supply. So what we are eating is connected with our involvement in the Gulf."

Science coverage is where political journalism was before Watergate, opines Pollan, "not nearly independent or investigative enough, and too reliant on scientists and their journals to determine what constitutes 'news' in the field ... [M]uch of what passes for journalism today never gets to the second step. The greater journalistic challenge is to place these developments in the proper ... contexts ... as when genetically modified crops are examined through the lens of ecology -- but also that of politics, economics, culture, history, business, etc. This is the direction in which I see science journalism evolving, and the prospect of speeding that evolution by helping to educate a generation of new science journalists excites me."

Pollan discussed his current book project at the end of our lunch, as he poured a cup of tisane from a clear glass teapot filled with hot water and gracefully floating leaves of lemon verbena. The book is "divided into three parts, each about a different one of our food chains. Each food chain has a farm at one end and a meal at the other." The first part covers the "industrial" food chain, "from a farm in Iowa to probably a meal from McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken eaten in a car at 60 miles per hour." The second part is the "post-industrial" food chain, and he's not sure

what that will look like yet. The last part of the book will be the most personal, the "first-person food chain or hunter-gatherer." This will "cover the food you grow, hunt and catch yourself. That will get into the most intimate issue with food and our relationship to other species.

"It's great to be working on this book in Berkeley, at the university. My premise is that we're eating more corn. You can use the natural and social history of corn, that one plant, to illuminate the entire industrial food chain. Our sweetener is corn, our meat is all corn-fed and all of our processed food is basically corn- and soy-based. We've been cornified. It turns out there are researchers on campus able to study the nutritional composition of people's diets by taking a strand of hair or slip of a fingernail and analyzing where the carbon comes from. So we're setting up some experiments to test how cornified we have become. I don't think we'll use me, though, because I avoid so much of that food now that I'm less corny than I used to be."

I ask him what we all should be doing as we hunt and gather in the grocery aisles. "It's about asking questions and knowing more. The more you know, the better you become at making good decisions for your health and the environment," he says, "and the more you realize that those are not separate issues. The other day I saw a woman ask the person behind the meat counter if the salmon was wild or farmed. When she heard it was farmed, she turned around and left the store. That sends a very powerful message."

Helen C. Wagnvoord writes from Oakland and is often hungry. She eats local, organic food interspersed with the occasional bag of peanut butter M&Ms.