

food's best defence

"Eat food. Not too much.
Mostly plants." Victoria Wells
meets the man whose seven words
have changed the way many
of us look at our
eating habits...

Photo by Ken Light

It's a simple question: where does our food come from? But it seems very few of us ever really took the time to examine it until author Michael Pollan tapped us on the shoulder with two books questioning what we're all eating and why.

"A lot of what I'm saying is very obvious," says Michael when we meet during his visit for the Auckland Writers and Readers Festival. "I'm not an original thinker. Sometimes I'm shocked that I can make a very nice living telling people such obvious things."

An award-winning journalist and Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at UC Berkeley, Michael Pollan says he thinks of himself more as a nature writer than a food writer, but is very interested in how the natural world and the human world come together.

"Our plates are one of the most important places and we change nature more through our eating than anything else we do, but we're not aware of it. We don't really see how our eating connects back to the land or other species. So...food was inevitably in my future."

His first book about the US food industry, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, was prompted by an alarming brush with an industrial feedlot and detailed his journey to find out where his food was coming from. The follow-up, *In Defence of Food*, puts forward the argument that we have lost touch with proper food thanks to the nutrition industry making us insecure about what we're eating. He says they do this by explaining food in complex terms of vitamins and nutrients and as a result we've also lost confidence in how to choose good food, and have simply handed control over to big companies who re-engineer food so they can keep churning out different products to market to us. The book questions how we got to this stage and makes suggestions as to how we can regain a good relationship with food.

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His opening words in *In Defence of Food* – "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" – seem resoundingly obvious until you realise that by and large, we don't. By food he means whole, fresh foods, not processed food, or "foodlike substances" as he calls them.

He makes the point that for thousands of years humans managed to decide what to eat without nutritional analysis from scientists and food marketers. But recently we have let them have more say in what we eat, and it has been to our detriment.

"We have had our confidence undermined and that has been a deliberate strategy on the part of what I call the nutritional industrial complex – the scientists and the corporate chefs, the people cooking our food from General Mills and Nestlé and all these companies. The

way you sell products to people is to make them insecure...and they have done the same with food. They are basically sending a message that 'We can cook better than you can; you don't have time to cook, we'll do it for you; we understand health so we can engineer products and they'll be better than nature made them. Look at our cereal, it has 18 vitamins in it.' Well the fact is all those vitamins were in wholegrain before you took them out and then added them back in."

This isn't to say he has a beef with the scientists – it's more those who use their findings.

"They're overconfident about their science, but when you talk to actual nutritional scientists they're a lot more modest than the corporations who take their claims and parade them, or the journalists who take their stories and put them on the front page. They (the scientists) understand at some basic level that this is very provisional information, that we're really in the dark – that fundamentally we don't understand both human metabolism and what's going on in a carrot."

Michael believes those with a deeply rooted food culture, such as in Italy, France, Japan and parts of China, have the advantage when it comes to knowing what to eat.

"It has a steadying influence and you are less likely, I think, to succumb to the messages of experts such as nutritionists or marketers with novel food products. In America we haven't had that, largely because we're an immigrant culture and so the messages we get about food lead to very rapid swings of the pendulum and rapid changes. Everyone is eating meat now, whereas five years ago everyone was eating carbohydrates and avoiding meat. It's weird – food culture should be very conservative and right now it's not. And so we're very vulnerable to food marketers who often get us into trouble."

As melodramatic as it may sound, it seems the way forward is to take back some of the power we have, albeit unwittingly, handed to food companies and their panel of nutritional experts.

"I think we over-estimate scientific wisdom and denigrate the wisdom that is encoded in a recipe. We serve tomatoes with olive oil and there is something that tastes right to us and that, as it turns out, is very healthy. There are other ways of knowing things other than scientific method – and one is trial and error.

"When people eat a certain combination of foods for a very long time there's a good chance there's a good health reason for it: that it keeps people healthy. We can benefit from that wisdom without understanding it. The scientists need to figure these things out, but we are just concerned with what works and what doesn't work. So what should guide us? My argument is culture: the wisdom of our grandmothers, the wisdom of cuisines. We have a lot to go on – people knew how to eat for thousands of years before they knew what an antioxidant was."

The key message from his book is a simple one: "Eat real food and cook it yourself. What is real food? It's the kind of food your great-grandmother would recognise; it's the food on the perimeter of the supermarket, not in the middle. You'll need certain staples from the

middle but stay out of it as much as possible. If you’re buying prepared meals from the middle of the store that’s not real food. And eat meals; real food, cooked yourself and eaten at tables.”

These are all part of the suggestions section in the book – others include avoiding food products that make health claims (his reasoning being that in order for it to make claims it must come in a package, meaning it’s more likely to be a processed food) and not getting your fuel from the same place your car does.

“Sit at a table and realise this is what happens at a meal and it isn’t just about fuel – it’s about communion. All that needs to be taught again. It’s too bad – we used to be able to learn it from our parents but a lot of people can’t anymore.

“There are families where they don’t have pots and pans, they just have microwaves and stuff in the freezer. So I think teaching kids about growing food and cooking food in school is really important. I think lunch should be an academic subject.”

He acknowledges the constructive role chefs are playing increasingly in highlighting producers and returning farming to a well-regarded profession.

“We are a culture driven by glamour and we de-glamourised farming for a long time – it was not work that intelligent, educated people did. And look what we got, we got crappy food. So the beginning of getting better food is making people appreciate farmers and also being willing to pay them a living wage.”

This ties in with his recommendation of paying more for food and getting better quality produce, but eating less. *In Defence of Food* outlines the dominance of corn and soybeans in many processed foods, which goes some way to explaining why these foods can leave us feeling hungry, as they don’t provide everything we need from a varied diet, and so we end up eating more of them.

“One of the simplest things people can do to change their diet is to cook. Because when you cook you’re not going to be eating processed food; you’re going to decide how much salt, sugar and fat is in it, not some corporation whose interest is in selling as much food as cheaply as possible.

“I think we need to help people understand that it isn’t so daunting, that the kind of heroic cooking you see on television, while entertaining, is not everyday cooking. You don’t have to make a work of art every time. If people would take some of the time they spend watching cooking shows to start cooking they would find they have a little more time than they thought. Yes, we think we’re really busy...but the point is you make time for the things you value – and what is more valuable than the food we feed to our families?

“If you tried to make a pizza yourself, even if you bought store-made dough, it’s going to be so much better. Why? Because to make that pizza last in the freezer for five years, or whatever it’s engineered to do, they’ve had to mess with it. They’ve had to add artificial flavours because there won’t be enough flavour in the ingredients they’re really using and

they cut corners on ingredients. That’s how they make it so cheap, and we have to help people understand they could do a better job.”

“This could take more time or money, (but) if you don’t have money you can make up for that with time and learn how to be a creative, thrifty chef as peasant cuisines have done for thousands of years: take cheap ingredients and make delicious food from it. That is the basis of most food culture. But that might mean spending your Sunday preparing meals for the week, or getting three meals out of a chicken. And people don’t feel that’s a good use of their time – what I’m suggesting is that it’s very rewarding both in the matter of your health and pleasure to move food closer to the centre of your life. That will repay that effort – it’s an old-fashioned argument in a way, but it needs to be made.”

In a time of rising food prices globally, he points out that cheap food is an illusion.

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“It’s never popular to say we need to spend more money on food than we are but if we want food that’s really of high quality, if we want food that’s grown in a way that’s sustainable and consistent with our values, in terms of the environment, in terms of animal welfare, in terms of social justice, it’s going to cost more. You’re not paying the real cost of cheap food. The real cost is charged to the environment, it’s charged to the animals, it’s charged to the public purse in America with subsidies and it’s charged to your health eventually.”

Money and time – they are the luxuries of upper socio-economic groups. So will someone who has a full-time job, four children and a limited budget really pass up that cheap microwaveable shepherd’s pie in favour of buying the ingredients at a local market and making it themselves? Michael Pollan argues that eventually, they will.

“Yes, this movement is open to charges of elitism right now, but a lot of movements start that way and don’t end up that way and we shouldn’t indict it for that. The fact is many important social movements begin with people who have the leisure and the time and the money to get involved. In our country the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, the environmental movement – all these were elitist movements when they started but they ended up being democratised and reaching a lot more people.

“I think we’re just at the beginning – I think this is going to get very big. We’re starting to have this debate in America: healthcare is too

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expensive, we want to democratise healthcare, how can we do it? One of the things we have to do is deal with these chronic diseases that food is causing – it’s US\$250 billion a year in America from diet-related chronic disease. So you have to connect the dots between the healthcare crisis and the food crisis – they’re the same crisis. And the environmental crisis. And as we begin to make those connections I think you’ll see a lot more pressure for change. Right now the pressure for change is coming from consumers with people voting with their forks, but that pressure will come from politicians and the government very soon and so we’ll get changes at policy level as well.”

It seems there’s a long way to go, but he isn’t militant about his message – he’d just like people to make a start.

“You needn’t be a purist or perfectionist about this. You’re not going to get it right every single time, and just because you don’t, doesn’t mean it’s not worth trying. I’ve been on the road a lot talking about food and there are many meals where I don’t practice what I’m preaching. So we shouldn’t beat ourselves up when that happens, but if we can get it right a couple of times a day, if we can spend that \$20 a week on local food, if we can have that one product that we’re always going to try to buy organic, you’re going to make a big contribution that way. You’re going to create new choices and build markets which will make the food more accessible. It’s not an all or nothing proposition, I think that’s a really important message. Because otherwise people will feel like: ‘I can’t do this, it’s too hard.’”

The suggestions at the end of the book are therefore a way to help people feel there is something they can start doing to make changes.

“I think in general it’s important to offer hope when you’re writing but in this particular issue there is hope. The fact is we do have alternatives. We’re not stuck with this big industrial processed food system if we don’t want to be. And we live in very exciting times when it comes to food: rising sophistication and knowledge and very rich opportunities to eat in a different way.”

In Defence of Food – the myth of nutrition and the pleasures of eating by Michael Pollan – Allan Lane/Penguin Books. ●



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