

# The Pleasures of Eating

By Wendell Berry

From *What Are People For? Essays*

- 1 Many times, after I have finished a lecture on the decline of American farming and rural life, someone in the audience has asked, “What can city people do?”
- 2 “Eat responsibly,” I have usually answered. Of course, I have tried to explain what I meant by that, but afterwards I have invariably felt that there was more to be said than I had been able to say. Now I would like to attempt a better explanation.
- 3 I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as “consumers.” If they think beyond that, they recognize that they are passive consumers. They buy what they want—or what they have been persuaded to want—within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are charged. And they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and the cost of what they are sold: How fresh is it? How pure or clean is it, how free of dangerous chemicals? How far was it transported, and what did transportation add to the cost? How much did manufacturing or packaging or advertising add to the cost? When the food product has been manufactured or “processed” or “precooked,” how has that affected its quality or price or nutritional value?
- 4 Most urban shoppers would tell you that food is produced on farms. But most of them do not know what farms, or what kinds of farms, or where the farms are, or what knowledge or skills are involved in farming. They apparently have little doubt that farms will continue to produce, but they do not know how or over what obstacles. For them, then, food is pretty much an abstract idea—something they do not know or imagine—until it appears on the grocery shelf or on the table.
- 5 The specialization of production induces specialization of consumption. Patrons of the entertainment industry, for example, entertain themselves less and less and have become more and more passively dependent on commercial suppliers. This is certainly true also of patrons of the food industry, who have tended more and more to be mere consumers—passive, uncritical, and dependent. Indeed, this sort of consumption may be said to be one of the chief goals of industrial production. The food industrialists have by now persuaded millions of consumers to prefer food that is already prepared. They will grow, deliver, and cook your food for you and (just like your mother) beg you to eat it. That they do not yet offer to insert it, pre-chewed, into your mouth is only because they have found no profitable way to do so. We may rest assured that they would be glad to find such a way. The ideal industrial food consumer would be strapped to a table with a tube running from the factory directly into his or her stomach.
- 6 Perhaps I exaggerate, but not by much. The industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical—in short, a victim. When food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer

associated with farming and with the land, then the eaters are suffering a kind of cultural amnesia that is misleading and dangerous. The current version of the “dream home” of the future involves “effortless” shopping from a list of available goods on a television monitor and heating precooked food by remote control. Of course, this implies and depends on, a perfect ignorance of the history of the food that is consumed. It requires that the citizenry should give up their hereditary and sensible aversion to buying a pig in a poke. It wishes to make the selling of pigs in pokes an honorable and glamorous activity. The dreamer in this dream home will perforce know nothing about the kind of quality of this food, or where it came from, or how it was produced and prepared, or what ingredients, additives, and residues it contains—unless, that is, the dreamer undertakes a close and constant study of the food industry, in which case he or she might as well wake up and play an active and responsible part in the economy of food.

- 7 There is, then, a politics of food that, like any politics, involves our freedom. We still (sometimes) remember that we cannot be free if our minds and voices are controlled by someone else. But we have neglected to understand that we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else. The condition of the passive consumer of food is not a democratic condition. One reason to eat responsibly is to live free.
- 8 But if there is a food politics, there are also a food esthetics and a food ethics, neither of which is dissociated from politics. Like industrial sex, industrial eating has become a degraded, poor, and paltry thing. Our kitchens and other eating places more and more resemble filling stations, as our homes more and more resemble motels. “Life is not very interesting,” we seem to have decided. “Let its satisfactions be minimal, perfunctory, and fast.” We hurry through our meals to go to work and hurry through our work to “recreate” ourselves in the evenings and on weekends and vacations. And then we hurry, with the greatest possible speed and noise and violence, through our recreation—for what? To eat the billionth hamburger at some fast-food joint hellbent on increasing the “quality” of our life? And all this is carried out in remarkable obliviousness to the causes and effects, the possibilities and the purposes, of the life of the body in this world.
- 9 One will find this obliviousness represented in virgin purity in the advertisements of the food industry, in which food wears as much makeup as the actors. If one gained one’s whole knowledge of food from these advertisements (as some presumably do), one would not know that the various edibles were ever living creatures, or that they all come from the soil, or that they were produced by work. The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared or fast food, confronts a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that every lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food.

- 10 And this peculiar specialization of the act of eating is, again, of obvious benefit to the food industry, which has good reasons to obscure the connection between food and farming. It would not do for the consumer to know that the hamburger she is eating came from a steer who spent much of his life standing deep in his own excrement in a feedlot, helping to pollute the local streams, or that the calf that yielded the veal cutlet on her plate spent its life in a box in which it did not have room to turn around. And, though her sympathy for the slaw might be less tender, she should not be encouraged to meditate on the hygienic and biological implications of mile-square fields of cabbage, for vegetables grown in huge monocultures are dependent on toxic chemicals—just as animals in close confinement are dependent on antibiotics and other drugs.
- 11 The consumer, that is to say, must be kept from discovering that, in the food industry—as in any other industry—the overriding concerns are not quality and health, but volume and price. For decades now the entire industrial food economy, from the large farms and feedlots to the chains of supermarkets and fast food restaurants, has been obsessed with volume. It has relentlessly increased scale in order to increase volume in order (presumably) to reduce costs. But as scale increases, diversity declines; as diversity declines, so does health; as health declines, the dependence on drugs and chemicals necessarily increases. As capital replaces labor, it does so by substituting machines, drugs, and chemicals for human workers and for the natural health and fertility of the soil. The food is produced by any means or any shortcut that will increase profits. And the business of the cosmeticians of advertising is to persuade the consumer that food so produced is good, tasty, healthful, and a guarantee of marital fidelity and long life.
- 12 It is possible, then, to be liberated from the husbandry and wifery of the old household food economy. But one can be thus liberated only by entering a trap (unless one sees ignorance and helplessness as the signs of privilege, as many people apparently do). The trap is the ideal of industrialism: a walled city surrounded by valves that let merchandise in but no consciousness out. How does one escape this trap? Only voluntarily, the same way that one went in: by restoring one's consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one's own part in the food economy. One might begin with the illuminating principle of Sir Albert Howard's *The Soil and Health*, that we should understand "the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject." Eaters, that is, must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used. This is a simple way of describing a relationship that is inexpressibly complex. To eat responsibly is to understand and enact, so far as one can, this complex relationship. What can one do? Here is a list, probably not definitive:
1. Participate in food production to the extent that you can. If you have a yard or even just a porch box or a pot in a sunny window, grow something to eat in it. Make a little compost of your kitchen scraps and use it for fertilizer. Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again. You will be fully responsible for any food that you grow for yourself, and you will know all about it. You will appreciate it fully, having known it all its life.

2. Prepare your own food. This means reviving in your own mind and life the arts of kitchen and household. This should enable you to eat more cheaply, and it will give you a measure of "quality control": you will have some reliable knowledge of what has been added to the food you eat.
  3. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home. The idea that every locality should be, as much as possible, the source of its own food makes several kinds of sense. The locally produced food supply is the most secure, the freshest, and the easiest for local consumers to know about and to influence.
  4. Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist. All the reasons listed for the previous suggestion apply here. In addition, by such dealing you eliminate the whole pack of merchants, transporters, processors, packagers, and advertisers who thrive at the expense of both producers and consumers.
  5. Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production. What is added to food that is not food, and what do you pay for these additions?
  6. Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening.
  7. Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species.
- 13 The last suggestion seems particularly important to me. Many people are now as much estranged from the lives of domestic plants and animals (except for flowers and dogs and cats) as they are from the lives of the wild ones. This is regrettable, for these domestic creatures are in diverse ways attractive; there is much pleasure in knowing them. And farming, animal husbandry, horticulture, and gardening, at their best, are complex and comely arts; there is much pleasure in knowing them, too.
- 14 It follows that there is great *displeasure* in knowing about a food economy that degrades and abuses those arts and those plants and animals and the soil from which they come. For anyone who does know something of the modern history of food, eating away from home can be a chore. My own inclination is to eat seafood instead of red meat or poultry when I am traveling. Though I am by no means a vegetarian, I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable in order to feed me. If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade. And I am getting almost as fussy about food plants. I like to eat vegetables and fruits that I know have lived happily and healthily in good soil, not the products of the huge, bechemicaled factory-fields that I have seen, for example, in the Central Valley of California. The industrial farm is said to have been patterned on the factory production line. In practice, it looks more like a concentration camp.

- 15 The pleasure of eating should be an *extensive* pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater. The same goes for eating meat. The thought of the good pasture and of the calf contentedly grazing flavors the steak. Some, I know, will think it blood thirsty or worse to eat a fellow creature you have known all its life. On the contrary, I think it means that you eat with understanding and with gratitude. A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes. The pleasure of eating, then, may be the best available standard of our health. And this pleasure, I think, is pretty fully available to the urban consumer who will make the necessary effort.
- 16 I mentioned earlier the politics, esthetics, and ethics of food. But to speak of the pleasure of eating is to go beyond those categories. Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend. When I think of the meaning of food, I always remember these lines by the poet William Carlos Williams, which seem to me merely honest:

There is nothing to eat,  
seek it where you will,  
But the body of the Lord.  
The blessed plants  
and the sea, yield it  
to the imagination  
intact.

# When a Crop Becomes King

By Michael Pollan

*New York Times*, July 19, 2002

- 1 Cornwall Bridge, CT—Here in southern New England the corn is already waist high and growing so avidly you can almost hear the creak of stalk and leaf as the plants stretch toward the sun. The ears of sweet corn are just starting to show up on local farm stands, inaugurating one of the ceremonies of an American summer. These days the nation's nearly 80 million-acre field of corn rolls across the countryside like a second great lawn, but this wholesome, all-American image obscures a decidedly more dubious reality.
- 2 Like the tulip, the apple and the potato, *zea mays* (the botanical name for both sweet and feed corn) has evolved with humans over the past 10,000 years or so in the great dance of species we call domestication. The plant gratifies human needs, in exchange for which humans expand the plant's habitat, moving its genes all over the world and remaking the land (clearing trees, plowing the ground, protecting it from its enemies) so it might thrive.
- 3 Corn, by making itself tasty and nutritious, got itself noticed by Christopher Columbus, who helped expand its range from the New World to Europe and beyond. Today corn is the world's most widely planted cereal crop. But nowhere have humans done quite as much to advance the interests of this plant as in North America, where *zea mays* has insinuated itself into our landscape, our food system—and our federal budget.
- 4 One need look no further than the \$190 billion farm bill President Bush signed last month to wonder whose interests are really being served here. Under the 10-year program, taxpayers will pay farmers \$4 billion a year to grow ever more corn, this despite the fact that we struggle to get rid of the surplus the plant already produces. The average bushel of corn (56 pounds) sells for about \$2 today; it costs farmers more than \$3 to grow it. But rather than design a program that would encourage farmers to plant less corn—which would have the benefit of lifting the price farmers receive for it—Congress has decided instead to subsidize corn by the bushel, thereby insuring that *zea mays* dominion over its 125,000-square mile American habitat will go unchallenged.
- 5 At first blush this subsidy might look like a handout for farmers, but really it's a form of welfare for the plant itself—and for all those economic interests that profit from its overproduction: the processors, factory farms, and the soft drink and snack makers that rely on cheap corn. For *zea mays* has triumphed by making itself indispensable not to farmers (whom it is swiftly and surely bankrupting) but to the Archer Daniels Midlands, Tysons and Coca-Colas of the world.
- 6 Our entire food supply has undergone a process of "cornification" in recent years, without our even noticing it. That's because, unlike in Mexico, where a corn-based diet has been the norm for centuries, in the United States most of the corn we consume is invisible, having been heavily processed or passed through food animals before it reaches us. Most of the animals we eat (chickens, pigs and cows) today subsist on a diet of corn, regardless of whether it is good for them. In the case of beef cattle, which evolved to eat grass, a corn diet wreaks havoc on their digestive system, making it necessary to feed them antibiotics to stave off illness and infection. Even farm-raised salmon are being bred to tolerate corn—not a food their evolution has



prepared them for. Why feed fish corn? Because it's the cheapest thing you can feed any animal, thanks to federal subsidies. But even with more than half of the 10 billion bushels of corn produced annually being fed to animals, there is plenty left over. So companies like A.D.M, Cargill and ConAgra have figured ingenious new ways to dispose of it, turning it into everything from ethanol to Vitamin C and biodegradable plastics.

- 7 By far the best strategy for keeping zea mays in business has been the development of high-fructose corn syrup, which has all but pushed sugar aside. Since the 1980's, most soft drink manufacturers have switched from sugar to corn sweeteners, as have most snack makers. Nearly 10 percent of the calories Americans consume now come from corn sweeteners; the figure is 20 percent for many children. Add to that all the corn-based animal protein (corn-fed beef, chicken and pork) and corn qua corn (chips, muffins, sweet corn) and you have a plant that has become one of nature's success stories, by turning us (along with several other equally unwitting species) into an expanding race of corn eaters.
- 8 So why begrudge corn its phenomenal success? Isn't this the way domestication should work?
- 9 The problem in corn's case is that we're sacrificing the health of both our bodies and the environment by growing and eating so much of it. Though we're only beginning to understand what our cornified food system is doing to our health, there's cause for concern. It's probably no coincidence that the wholesale switch to corn sweeteners in the 1980's marks the beginning of the epidemic of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in this country. Sweetness became so cheap that soft drink makers, rather than lower their prices, super-sized their serving portions and marketing budgets. Thousands of new sweetened snack foods hit the market, and the amount of fructose in our diets soared.
- 10 This would be bad enough for the American waistline, but there's also preliminary research suggesting that high-fructose corn syrup is metabolized differently than other sugars, making it potentially more harmful. A recent study at the University of Minnesota found that a diet high in fructose (as compared to glucose) elevates triglyceride levels in men shortly after eating, a phenomenon that has been linked to an increased risk of obesity and heart disease. Little is known about the health effects of eating animals that have themselves eaten so much corn, but in the case of cattle, researchers have found that corn-fed beef is higher in saturated fats than grass-fed beef.
- 11 We know a lot more about what 80 million acres of corn is doing to the health of our environment: serious and lasting damage. Modern corn hybrids are the greediest of plants, demanding more nitrogen fertilizer than any other crop. Corn requires more pesticide than any other food crop. Runoff from these chemicals finds its way into the groundwater and, in the Midwestern corn belt, into the Mississippi River, which carries it to the Gulf of Mexico, where it has already killed off marine life in a 12,000 square mile area.
- 12 To produce the chemicals we apply to our cornfields takes vast amounts of oil and natural gas. (Nitrogen fertilizer is made from natural gas, pesticides from oil.) America's corn crop might look like a sustainable, solar-powered system for producing food, but it is actually a huge, inefficient, polluting machine that guzzles fossil fuel—a half a gallon of it for every bushel.

- 13 So it seems corn has indeed become king. We have given it more of our land than any other plant, an area more than twice the size of New York State. To keep it well fed and safe from predators we douse it with chemicals that poison our water and deepen our dependence on foreign oil. And then in order to dispose of all the corn this cracked system has produced, we eat it as fast as we can in as many ways as we can—turning the fat of the land into, well, fat. One has to wonder whether corn hasn't at last succeeded in domesticating us.

Michael Pollan has written several books since 2002 when this article was written. Two of his most recent books are *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, published in 2008, and *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, published in 2007.



# If You Pitch It, They Will Eat

By David Barboza

*New York Times*, August 3, 2003

- 1 The McDonald's Corporation wants to be everywhere that children are.
- 2 So besides operating 13,602 restaurants in the United States, it has plastered its golden arches on Barbie dolls, video games, book jackets, and even theme parks.
- 3 McDonald's calls this promotion and brand extension. But, a growing number of nutritionists call it a blitzkrieg that perverts children's eating habits and sets them on a path to obesity.
- 4 Marketing fast food, snacks, and beverages to children is at least as old as Ronald McDonald himself. What's new, critics say, is the scope and intensity of the assault. Big food makers like McDonald's and Kraft Foods Inc. are finding every imaginable way to put their names in front of children. And they're spending more than ever—\$15 billion last year, compared with \$12.5 billion in 1998, according to research conducted at Texas A&M University in College Station.
- 5 "What really changed over the last decade is the proliferation of electronic media," says Susan Linn, a psychologist who studies children's marketing at Harvard's Judge Baker Children's Center. "It used to just be Saturday-morning television. Now it's Nickelodeon, movies, video games, the Internet, and even marketing in schools."
- 6 Product tie-ins are everywhere. There are SpongeBob SquarePants Popsicles, Oreo Cookie preschool counting books, and Keebler's Scooby Doo Cookies. There is even a Play-Doh Lunchables play set.
- 7 While the companies view these as harmless promotional pitches, lawyers are threatening a wave of obesity-related class-action lawsuits. Legislators are pressing to lock food companies out of school cafeterias. And some of the fiercest critics are calling for an outright ban on all food advertising aimed at children.
- 8 "The problem of obesity is so staggering, so out of control, that we have to do something," says Walter Willett, a professor of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "The vast majority of what they sell is junk," Mr. Willett says of the big food makers. "How often do you see fruits and vegetables marketed?"
- 9 The increase in food marketing to children has closely tacked their increase in weight. Since 1980, the number of obese children has more than doubled to 16 percent, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- 10 School districts in New York and Los Angeles have responded by banning the sale of sugary beverages and snacks in school vending machines.
- 11 Most big food companies, despite some promises to offer healthier foods and in some cases to limit marketing in schools, deny that they are to blame for the epidemic of excess weight. They insist that sedentary behavior, a lack of exercise, and poor supervision and eating habits are responsible.

- 12 Food companies say their commercials don't encourage overeating, that the foods they advertise are meant to be "part of a balanced diet," and that some foods are meant to be only occasional treats.
- 13 "We talk about offering carrot sticks," says Karlin Linhardt, the director of youth marketing at McDonald's. "And we have parents come in and say, 'We offer them carrot sticks at home. When we come to McDonald's we want a treat, french fries.'"
- 14 Why would companies take aim at children so energetically? Because they, increasingly, are where the money is.
- 15 "It's the largest market there is," says James McNeal, a professor of marketing at Texas A&M and an authority on marketing to children. "Kids four to twelve spend on their own wants and needs about \$30 billion a year. But their influence on what their parents spend is \$600 billion. That's blue sky."
- 16 In toy stores, children can become accustomed to food brands early by buying a Hostess bake set, Barbie's Pizza Hut play set, or Fisher-Price's Oreo Matchin' Middles game. And, for budding math whizzes, there is a series of books from Hershey's Kisses on addition, subtraction, and fractions.
- 17 Schools are also a major marketing site. With many school districts facing budget shortfalls, a quick solution has come from offering more profitable fast food from outlets like McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut.
- 18 Some schools have contracts to sell fast food; others have special days allotted for fast food. The Skinner Montessori school in Vancouver, Washington, for instance, has "McDonald's Wednesdays" and "KFC Fridays."
- 19 There are McDonald's McTeacher's Nights in Jefferson City, Missouri, and Pizza Hut Days in Garden City, Kansas.
- 20 "It's awesome. They love it," Tracy Johnson, director of nutrition for the 7,500-student school district in Garden City, Kansas, says of the Pizza Hut food. "We also serve vegetables. We try to make it into a healthy meal."
- 21 According to a survey by the CDC, about 20 percent of the nation's schools now offer brand-name fast food.
- 22 Vending machines now dominate school corridors. Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola have "pouring rights" contracts in hundreds of schools nationwide.
- 23 Lawyers and consumer advocates have harshly criticized educators for "commercializing the schools" and sending poor dietary messages to children.
- 24 "It seems very clear it's a breach of duty," says John Banzhaf, a professor of law at George Washington University in Washington and one of the lawyers pressing for class-action lawsuits against big food companies. "Schools get paid a kickback for every sugary soft drink or burger sold."
- 25 Some food companies heatedly defend their promotions and their products. "I think our communication with children is appropriate; we're not shoving it down their throat," says Ken Barun, director of healthy lifestyles at McDonald's, adding, "To make a general statement that McDonald's food is unhealthy is wrong."

- 26 Industry officials concur. “These foods and beverages are safe, and consumers—in some cases parents—have to be the one to make the decisions about how much should be eaten,” says Gene Grabowski, a spokesman for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, which represents the nation’s biggest food companies. “The industry is trying very hard to be responsible in the way it markets these foods.”
- 27 Still, legislators and school districts are rethinking school marketing. There are more than 30 bills before state legislatures around the country proposing to ban certain snacks and beverages from school vending machines, according to the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University in Tempe.
- 28 Television, of course, remains the most powerful medium for selling to children. These days there is no shortage of advertising opportunities with the emergence of the Walt Disney Company’s Disney Channel; Nickelodeon, which is owned by Viacom; and the Cartoon Network, a unit of AOL Time Warner’s Turner Broadcasting.
- 29 Marketers know that children love animals and cartoon characters, and industry observers say they have used that knowledge not just to create new shows but to produce a new generation of animated pitchmen.
- 30 Some critics say children often can’t differentiate the programs from the commercials and that food companies and producers of children’s shows have helped blur the line by creating characters that leap back and forth, from pitchman to program character.
- 31 SpongeBob SquarePants has his own show. But he also sells Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, Popsicles, Kleenex, DVDs, skateboards, fruit snacks, and dozens of other products.
- 32 In fact, a series of big marketing alliances has bound food companies and television show producers like never before. Disney, for instance, has teamed up with McDonald’s on movies and product tie-ins. Disney and Kellogg collaborate on a line of cereals that includes Disney Chocolate Mud & Bugs. And Nickelodeon has struck marketing deals with the Quaker Oats Company and General Mills Inc.
- 33 “The programs have become advertising for the food, and the food has become advertising for the programs,” says Professor Linn of Harvard.
- 34 During Nickelodeon’s “SpongeBob SquarePants” 30-minute cartoon last week, more than half the commercials were about food. The spots showed that children who consume “Go-gurt,” the new yogurt-on-the-go, loved skateboards and danced on the walls.
- 35 A child who poured milk on his Post Honeycomb cereal was transformed into the raffish Honeycomb monster named the Craver. Children walked into walls after seeing other youngsters’ tongues tattooed with Betty Crocker’s Fruit Roll-Ups. And two others reveled in having so much sugar on their Kellogg’s Cinnamon Krunchers cereal that even the tidal wave of milk that washed over their treehouse couldn’t wipe off the sugary flavor.
- 36 But do these commercials really resonate with children? Marketing experts say yes; the children do, too. Nicky Greenberg, who is six and lives with her parents in Lower Manhattan, often spends her afternoons watching Nickelodeon. She can sing the theme song from “SpongeBob SquarePants,” and she says her parents buy her Kellogg’s Cinnamon Toast Crunch because she loves the commercials.

- 37 “On the commercial,” she says, “There’s a captain that goes on the submarine, and there’s an octopus, and three kids. And then the girl says, ‘Just taste this, pirate.’ And the pirate says, ‘Ayyy, yummy!’”
- 38 The reaction was no different last week at a supermarket on the South Side of Chicago.
- 39 Tatanisha Roberson, who is eight, was riding on the front of a shopping cart pushed by her mother, Erica, twenty-four, heading toward the cereal aisle.
- 40 The question was posed: What kind of food is Tatanisha interested in? “Anything that comes on the TV, she’ll get,” her mother said, rolling her eyes. “Rugrats Fruit Snacks; Scooby Doo Fruit Snacks; Flintstones’ Jell-O.”
- 41 In private, some company executives complain that when parents go to the grocery store they don’t buy healthy products that are offered. Professor McNeal at Texas A&M says the companies are a scapegoat.
- 42 “I don’t think they should be singled out,” he says. “Mom blames everyone but herself. There’s an abdication of the parents’ role. You’ve got 70 percent of moms who are working, so when they’re home they try to please their kids.”
- 43 The big food companies say they follow a set of guidelines for television advertising enforced by the Children’s Advertising Review Unit, which was set up and financed by advertisers to regulate themselves.
- 44 The companies say their ads don’t show overeating or make false health claims.
- 45 Officials at the Children’s Advertising Review Unit acknowledge that they don’t look at the collective message food companies send to children. “We’re not nutritionists,” says Elizabeth Lascoux, a spokeswoman for the unit. “We’re not in the position to say this food item cannot be part of a healthy diet.”
- 46 Sensing a backlash to advertising and promotion, especially in schools, Kraft said last month that it would end all in-school marketing efforts. And General Mills, the maker of Cheerios, says that in-school marketing is wrong.
- 47 “We just view it as inappropriate,” says Tom Forsythe. “There’s no gatekeeper; they’re a captive audience.”
- 48 Some marketing deals have come under pressure. For example, last week, the British Broadcasting Corporation said it would no longer allow its children’s television characters to be used in fast-food sponsorships with companies like McDonald’s after consumer groups criticized the public broadcaster for helping promote junk food.
- 49 Some companies deny that they even market to children. Both Coke and Pepsi insist that they direct their products only to teenagers and adults. And Yum Brands, which operates KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell, says it does not market to children or have operations in schools.
- 50 But sometimes the evidence would seem to contradict those statements. Coke signed a multimillion-dollar global marketing deal tied to the Harry Potter character in 2001, and many schools, like the one in Garden City, Kansas, have contracts to serve food from Pizza Hut.

- 51 Amy Sherwood, a spokeswoman for Yum Brands, says, “That must be a local deal with the franchisees and those schools because we don’t do that on a national level.”
- 52 Kari Bjorhus, a spokeswoman at Coke, said, “We absolutely don’t market to children. Our feeling with Harry Potter is it really appeals to the whole family.”
- 53 Yet with regulators, lawmakers, and others mounting campaigns that seek to make big food companies look like big tobacco companies, which have been sued over marketing campaigns geared toward youths, something is bound to change, industry experts say. The World Health Organization and even Wall Street analysts are calling on big food companies to rein in their marketing campaigns and change the way they do business.
- 54 “The food industry will have to review its marketing practices and transform itself, in our view, regardless of potential regulation or litigation,” Arnaud Langlois, an analyst at J.P. Morgan, wrote in a report last April.
- 55 There is a need to set specific standards on what is marketed to children, according to Professor Willett at Harvard. “We don’t sell children guns, alcohol, or drugs, but we do allow them to be exploited by food companies.”
- 56 Even some influential marketing experts are beginning to think their clients might come around.
- 57 Dan Acuff, a leading children’s marketing consultant, says that when profits are at stake, companies listen.
- 58 “If it’s going to hit the bottom line, they’ll listen,” he says. “You’d like them to have a conscience, but conscience and bottom line are not in the same paradigm in the corporate world.”

# Big Agriculture Is the Only Option to Stop the World Going Hungry

**Food riots, such as those in Mozambique, could soon be seen here too unless we overhaul the way we produce food.**

By Jay Rayner  
*The Observer*, September 11, 2010

- 1 You have to go back to 1816 to find a serious British food riot, the year after an Indonesian volcano erupted cancelling summer and blighting the global crop. Today, food riots are what happen in Thailand, Mexico or, as we reported last week, Mozambique, where seven people died in protests over a 30% hike in the price of bread. The question is whether the circumstances which led to that murderous bout of civil unrest have any implications for Britain. Too often, we regard ourselves as mere observers and commentators rather than potential participants in the dramas surrounding the complexities of food security. Until a few years ago, this was British government policy. A Cabinet Office document, nicknamed by Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University, the “leave it to Tesco report”, argued that we are a rich developed nation which could buy its way out of any supply crisis on the global market.
- 2 But with Russia banning wheat exports until the end of 2011, commodity prices lurching upwards and the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organisation preparing for an emergency meeting to discuss the crisis, that position looks hopelessly naive. Having spent the past month travelling across Britain investigating the sustainability of our food supply for a new TV show, it’s clear to me that we risk replacing a culture of a cheap and plentiful present with one of hyper-expense and scarcity in just a few years’ time.
- 3 We need to look seriously at how we produce our food and how we eat it. Our self-sufficiency has dropped in the past decade from north of 70% to around 60%, according to official figures. Many experts think it may actually be nearer to just 50%. We import 60% of our vegetables. If this drift continues, we will be left exposed to the sort of events that triggered the riots in Africa. We need to make difficult decisions which a lot of people who regard themselves as serious foodies may find deeply unappetising. And we need to make them fast.
- 4 Any consumer of gastroporn in print, online and on our TV screens would imagine we were already having this debate. Words such as local, seasonal and organic have become a holy trinity. But these are merely lifestyle choices for the affluent middle-classes, a matter of aesthetics, and nothing to do with the real issues. Start in the fruit aisle of your supermarket. The major supermarkets are not inherently evil. On balance, they probably help our lives more than they hinder them, but they only respond to consumer demand and what the consumer demands is not always right.
- 5 Look at the bags of perfect fruit, shiny, unblemished, the supermodels of the apple world. They only look like that because of the grading out of fruit which, while perfectly edible, is not comely enough for harried shoppers. In Kent recently, I met David Deme, for decades an apple farmer, who a few years ago decided he had to stop supplying supermarkets because he was being forced to “grade out” 30% to



- 40% of his fruit. He found this unacceptable and chose to move into a premium market, by making apple juice. Other English apple growers have similar stories to tell.
- 6 Which goes some way to explaining why Britain, a country perfectly suited to growing apples, now imports 70% of those we eat. The apple shelves are a global tour, from Chile to South Africa, from New Zealand to China, even as we head into prime British apple season. We will never become self-sufficient in apples, but it is possible to reverse the numbers so that only 30% come from abroad, if we stop being obsessed over the look of the fruit and are prepared to pay more for what we buy, so that fruit farmers could invest in new varieties and the best storage techniques.
  - 7 Cost is key. In the early 90s, we spent roughly 20% of our wages on our shopping bill. Today, it's nearer 10%, even allowing for recent inflation, and we assume these low prices to be a right. The result is margins for our farmers that are so tight many are giving up. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the dairy industry which is not only shedding farmers every week, but losing its future workforce too, as the traditions of family succession dwindle. Farmers' kids don't want to go into the business and their parents don't want them too, either. A country suited to dairy farming is no longer self-sufficient in milk. We're importing the stuff.
  - 8 The solution, embracing of the kind of super dairy proposed at Nocton Heath in Lincolnshire, which will house more than 8,000 cows, bedded down indoors on sand, is met with howls of derision because it's not "natural". The dairy farmers I've talked to may take issue with it for the impact it could have on smaller farms, but none of them sees animal welfare as an issue. Unhappy, ill animals do not produce milk, so it's not in the farm's interests to mistreat them or shorten their lifespan. Also, the carbon footprint of such a large facility may actually be many times smaller than that of the traditional dairy farm.
  - 9 If we are to survive the coming food security storm, we will have to embrace unashamedly industrial methods of farming. We need to abandon the mythologies around agriculture, which take the wholesome marketing of high-end food brands at face value—farmer in smock, ear of corn, happy pig—and recognise that farming really is an industry, much like car manufacturing or steel forging, one which always works better on a mass scale, but which can still be managed sustainably.
  - 10 Bespoke is fine for those with deep pockets. As for the rest, we live on a small, overpopulated island with a growing head count and for many big is the only way to go. This is not an endorsement of the worst excesses of the factory farming system. Indeed, only by accepting it can we as consumers get the producers to work to the exacting standards we demand.
  - 11 Can we afford to ignore these issues? I don't think so. An elitist, belly-obsessed minority, the ones who think the colour plates in the Sunday supplements are a true reflection of real lives if only we all made the effort, may rage against big agriculture and refuse to engage with it. However, when basic ingredients become scarce and prices shoot up on the international markets, their cries will sound increasing hollow, compared to the screams of those who really cannot afford to feed their families. Yes, it has been a very long time since a British food riot, but that does not mean it cannot happen again.