

In defense of food, not just individual nutrients

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

In his latest work, "In Defense of Food," journalist Michael Pollan proposes a prescriptive answer to the question of what we should eat that comes down to seven simple but liberating words: Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

This provocative manifesto is a straightforward and compelling argument for how best to eat in a society awash with fast food, grocery stores containing endless aisles of "food products" our grandmothers wouldn't recognize as food, and platefuls of conflicting advice from so-called nutrition experts.

As was the case in his recent bestseller, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," Pollan takes direct aim at economic forces in American society that, in less than a century, have given us the Western diet that we all take for granted.

In our lifetimes, the emergence of agribusiness and the industrialization of food have left us with a diet consisting of "lots of processed foods and meat, lots of added fat and sugar, lots of everything – except vegetables, fruits, and whole grains." The essence of the Western diet has been the gradual but steady disappearance of "food" from our plates and its replacement by an ever-expanding array of "food like substances" such as Gogurt, Twinkies, and Vitamin Water.

As the Western diet has become the norm in the US and, worse, spread to other corners of the planet, its adoption has been followed by a predictable series of Western diseases, including the principal sources of death and disability in our society: obesity, diabetes and other metabolic disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer.

Pollan also takes aim at "nutritionism" or the ideology prevalent among the food professionals and nutrition experts that "food is foremost about promoting physical health [and] that nutrients in food should be divided into the healthy ones and the unhealthy ones – good nutrients and bad." It thus follows that "when the emphasis is on quantifying the nutrients contained in foods (or, to be precise, the recognized nutrients in foods), any qualitative distinction between whole foods and processed foods is apt to disappear."

One troubling consequence of the prevailing nutrient-by-nutrient approach to eating – carbs versus fats this year, omega-3 versus omega-6 fatty acids next year, animal protein versus plant protein since the 1960s, and so on – is the confusion sown by food marketers who repeatedly peddle the ridiculous claim that processed foods may be considered healthier for you than whole foods if they contain the appropriate quantities of added nutrients (added, of course, after being refined or processed in the first place!).

The paradox, he concludes, is that, as we have become increasingly obsessed with eating better and focused on nutrients, we have by all accounts gotten fatter and less healthy.

The most intriguing aspects of Pollan's work are its simplicity and the compelling link he draws between an approach to eating that is not only good for your weight and health, but also good for the planet. As such, he joins a growing and diverse set of writers – including culinary columnist Mark Bittman ("Food Matters") and novelist Barbara Kingsolver ("Animal, Vegetable, Miracle") – who contend that simple, straightforward changes to our diet not only hold the promise of shrinking your waistline, they might help shrink your carbon footprint.

If you're heading west to the ocean this summer and still in want of something to read, let me recommend adding "In Defense of Food" to your beach bag. I can promise that on your return, you will bypass the malt shops and burger shacks that line Interstate 80 and pay a visit to one of those fruit and vegetable stands outside of Sacramento that you've always meant to visit but somehow could never find the time.

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