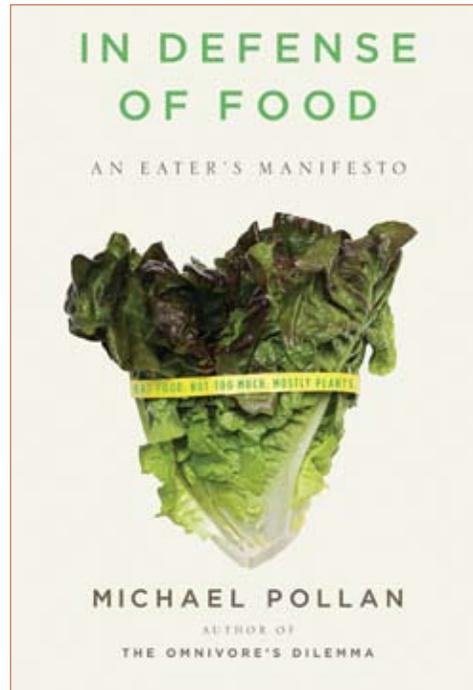


EDIBLE READS

BY ANNETTE GALLAGHER WEISMAN

POLLANMANIA

Michael Pollan and fellow authors advocate eating local



I'm in love—again. I haven't told my husband yet; you're the first to know. My new crush is the latest sustainable food guru, Michael Pollan. While attending his reading at my local bookstore, I wasn't expecting to find anyone other than me, a few other foodies and Pollan in attendance. Instead, I had to teeter-totter in my Manolos (OK, clogs) to see above a huge crowd of people who'd nabbed every conceivable vantage point. Even before this tall, bald, bespectacled man began to speak, we were in his thrall. Such is Pollanmania.

Pollan has written five books on topics that include gardening, building and design, the sex lives of bees and plants, and from where our food comes. Pollan's latest book is called *In Defense of Food* (Penguin Press; \$21.95). He'll tell you himself that his manifesto, "Eat food, mostly vegetables, not too much," is right on the cover so you don't *have* to buy the book. But you'll be glad you did, because he writes the way he talks, in a witty and affable manner reminiscent of one's favorite professor. In fact, he is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

Of course, there's a lot more to the book than mostly eating veggies. Among other things, he says that nutritionism—yes it is an *ism* in Pollan-speak—is responsible for our obsession with vitamins. Pollan parses for us the state of our food today; the fact that much of it is contrived substances disguised as food, a result of the demand for those trendy nutrients. Not content with the nutrients found in individual foods—should a product be lacking something popular, say the omega-3 fatty-acids—the food industry can remedy this quicker than one can say commercialism. The result is a new breed of nutritiously engineered "food products" that shamefully scream out from the food aisles: "I have all the B vitamins or free

radicals and antioxidants over here. Pick me!"

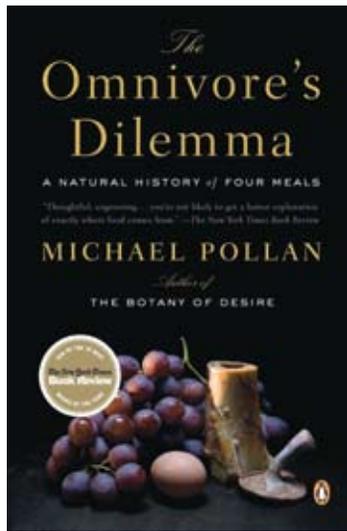
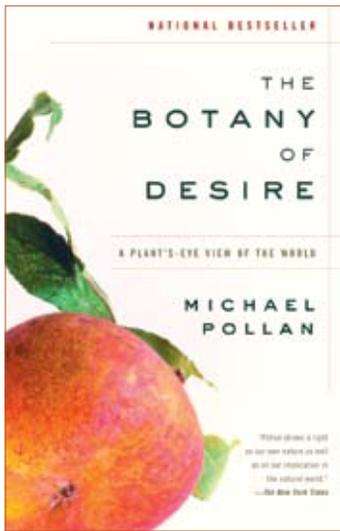
Pollan advocates not eating anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize: wholesome locally produced food, not imitation food that's been doctored to sound healthy. He also makes jaw-dropping statements like, "the human digestive tract has roughly as many neurons as the spinal column ... their existence suggests that much more is going on in digestion than simply the breakdown of foods into chemicals." Who knew? By contrast, Pollan's prose in *The Botany of Desire* (Random House; \$15) is both lyrical and sensual with lines such as, "The bees will let themselves be lured into the most ridiculous positions, avidly nosing their way like pigs through the thick purple brush of a thistle, rolling around helplessly in

a single peony's blond Medusa thatch of stamens." His thesis about humans being domesticated by plants, rather than the other way around, is riveting.

I also found fascinating *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Penguin Books; \$16), in which Pollan discusses our food choices, the ethics of slaughtering animals, gathering fungi and even hunting wild boar. I now have an insatiable appetite for his books and am working backward with two more to go. If you haven't read any Pollan yet, get thee to a book store or the nearest library.

Ten Speed Press recently published two books that tie-in with Pollan's advocacy to eat locally produced foods. Those of us who are carnivores will find *The Niman Ranch Cookbook* (\$24.95) by Bill Niman and Janet Fletcher an excellent reference that includes humane practices in animal husbandry. The first part gives the history of the Niman Ranch, now a major producer of fine meats, and you'll find shopping and cooking tips, as well as stellar recipes

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from many renowned chefs such as Michael Peternell of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., and Mario Batali of Babbo in New York City. This soft-cover book has beautiful photographs with a clear layout that makes it a pleasure to read.

The newly updated *New Good Food*, by Margaret Wittenberg, (\$19.95), lacks artistic visuals but is crammed with useful information about what to buy and what's good for you. While it does include sections on dairy and meats, it will also appeal to vegetarians and vegans with everything one needs to know about types of grains, beans, nuts, seeds, and as they say, "much more." There is even a handy pocket version.

But back to Pollan...one of these days, Michael and I are going to sit down for a little chat—maybe a follow-up discussion to the meaning of life, which no doubt he's figured out by now. Seriously, if you have a question you'd like me to ask him, just email me: agweisman@gmail.com ☘

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