



## In Defense of Food

*Who's defending the food industry?*

He has done it again. Following up on his best seller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (see my review in *Food in Canada, Summertime and The Reading's Not Easy*, July/August 2006), Michael Pollan has written another fascinating book on food. *In Defense of Food* (Penguin, 2007), like his earlier book, is a trenchant rant against the American food processing industry. His searing indictment is unrelentingly biased and often fatally flawed, but he makes several persuasive arguments that are real body blows to the food processing industry and its academic scientific partner-in-crime, the food nutritionist.

A brief review cannot do justice to the scope and depth of this serious book. Here is just a sample of his arguments: Most people do not eat real food anymore (their diets are primarily made up of other edible food-like substances). The low-fat food campaign was based on little scientific evidence, has caused unintended health problems, and this "biggest experiment in applied nutritionism in history" has been a huge public health mistake as there is no good evidence that dietary fat is responsible for any chronic disease (it's all a big fat lie). All health claims are unreliable and misinform consumers. Nutritional science, particularly nutritional epidemiology, is so deeply flawed and co-opted by the food industry that it is highly unreliable. Even the famous Nurses' Health Study is profoundly misleading. While food-related illnesses are exploding, doctors are seeing more and more patients suffering from the new mental illness of orthorexics, people with an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating. While Pollan's advice is to be the kind of person who takes nutritional supplements, don't actually waste your money buying them, he says, as "most supplements don't appear to work." And, he adds, all of the uncertainty about nutrition "should not obscure the fact that the chronic diseases that now kill most of us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food."

Pollan persuasively expands on Gyorgy Scrinis' concept of nutritionism, an ideology that holds that foods are simply the sum of their nutrient parts; nutrients are either good or bad, so we need experts to help us decide what to eat. This scientific reductionism is so wholly misleading that most nutritional science is profoundly flawed. Pollan is good at selecting interesting facts to make a broader compelling point. For example, he points out that a well-known whole grain bread shouldn't even be allowed to be called

bread because in addition to the four basic ingredients for real bread, this edible food-like product has 41 other ingredients.

Of course much of Pollan's "facts" are really arguments using selective science. His ideology – let's call it Pollanism – is characterized by two main principles: we need to return to the small-scale family farm, eating mostly local fresh produce; and secondly, it is a truth universally acknowledged that all big food companies have engaged in a giant conspiracy to have Washington lobbyists exert undue influence on government regulators so that industry remains unconstrained in its duping of the poor American consumer. His first principle is naive and patently silly in a cold country like Canada. I don't know enough about the American system to comment on the accuracy of the second principle of Pollanism in Washington, but after seven years as a food regulator and six years providing legal and occasional government relations advice to the Canadian food industry, I have to say that in my experience our food industry – Canada's second largest manufacturing sector – has been remarkably ineffective at comprehensive government lobbying and too competitive and fragmented to ever organize any grand conspiracy in Ottawa. Individual trade associations and single-commodity producer organizations do outstanding technical work with regulators, but they are generally reactive and underfunded. With the exception of the dairy farmers, they spend almost nothing on communications and little on government relations.

With its \$32-billion marketing machine, it's surprising how muted the American food industry's response was to Pollan's first book. They will ignore this book at their peril. In Canada, the food industry has to put some serious resources and effort into explaining to the general public that it produces safe, low-cost quality food that responds to consumer demand. We have a great story to tell. Without a strong communications and collective government relations effort books like Pollan's will only reinforce the growing view of many consumers and regulators that Big Food is becoming the modern equivalent of Big Tobacco.

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*Ronald L. Doering, BA, LL.B, MA, LL.D, is a past president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. He practices food law in the Ottawa offices of Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP, and can be reached at: [Ronald.doering@gowlings.com](mailto:Ronald.doering@gowlings.com)*